

# ***Jeremiah***

## ***Prophet of God***

**The Man  
His Writings  
His Struggles  
His Victories**

**By Jack Burch**





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## Preface

The length of the writings from the Major Prophets is somewhat intimidating. We look at the books from afar, perhaps reading them as part of a Daily Bible Reading regimen, but usually are glad when we complete their boring oracles. However, when we go beneath the surface, we find some of the richest insights we have ever discovered. In Jeremiah the conflicts and struggles of a deeply devoted man come to life and present themselves as part of the humanity of every child of God. Jeremiah lives and breathes the life and air which each of us lives and breathes. In his experiences we come face to face with ourselves and our own struggles. The autobiographical information shows one man's passion for his wayward countrymen, and the depths of his sorrow at their rejection of truth. He is properly called "the weeping prophet," but it is not until we begin to absorb him into our consciousness that he comes to life. His fidelity is clearly seen in his profound sadness and in his willingness to be abused, imprisoned, kidnapped, threatened, and ultimately rejected because he relentlessly warns his countrymen of their contempt for God's covenant.

The study of Jeremiah reaffirms the fact that fidelity comes with a price – the price of self sacrifice, perseverance, and the willingness to go where the "wise and religious" dare not tread. An intensive study of this great book and its main character creates a complex blending of joy and sorrow, of hopefulness and distress.

The comments in this booklet are primarily designed to describe the text in its historical, cultural, religious, and moral/ethical backgrounds. Scholars and commentators have varied opinions on sources, authenticity, and other issues which arise as we study the book. I have tried to discuss the variety of viewpoints, while still acknowledging the integrity of the book. This booklet is not designed to be used alone, but to be studied alongside the text of Jeremiah.

## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction to Jeremiah**

#### **The prophetic calling in Israel**

To the contemporary mind the word “prophet” brings thoughts of one who predicts the future, sometimes speaking mysteries in symbolic language and giving vivid warnings of tragedy to come if people do not turn back to God. Israel had a long and honorable experience with prophets going all the way back to Moses. In fact, Abimelech called Abraham a prophet when Abraham lied about Sarah saying she was his sister, Gen. 20:1-7. Miriam, Deborah and others are referred to as prophetesses. These instances show that the word was used rather broadly in earlier Biblical times. During the time span between Moses and Samuel we see very little prophetic activity as we read the history of Israel. True, God spoke through a variety of persons, particularly the judges, but little prophetic activity is recorded.

During that time there were no literary prophets. Samuel left no prophetic writings but he stands at the origin of an important band of non-literary prophets who spoke on behalf of the Lord and left an enormous imprint on the life and history of Israel. Samuel is described more as a judge and spiritual leader of Israel than as a prophet.

This brings up a question concerning what constituted a prophet of the Lord. This is difficult to answer, and we cannot give specific qualifications or descriptions of these people. We know that they were an accepted part of Israelite life, and were recognized to some extent as the spokesmen for God. We would like to know all of the criteria, but we know very little about them. Along with the true prophets of God there were, at various times, false prophets as well. The Old Testament refers to certain persons as “the man of God,” “seers,” or “prophets.” These prophets always had a religious and social connotation, at times mixed with a political or military connotation. Both the prophets and their messages were regular and accepted parts of the life of the nation even prior to the rise of the monarchy in the eleventh century B.C. When Saul and his father’s servants were looking for his father’s lost donkeys they went to Samuel because he was a “seer” I Sam. 9:1-9. Shortly after that as Saul joined a group of prophets coming down from the high place Saul joined them and prophesied, I Sam. 10:5-11. The participants in these guilds were known as “sons of the prophets.” See I Kgs. 20:35, Amos 7:14. God used certain men to convey his messages to the people.

During various periods in Israel’s history non-literary prophets appeared, including Nathan (II Sam. 12), Gad (II Sam. 24), Ahijah (I Kg. 11), a nameless “man of God out of Judah” (I Kgs. 13:1), Shemaiah (I Kgs. 12), Micaiah (I Kgs. 22:8-28), Elijah, Elisha, and others. The Old Testament gives very little specific information on the work of these prophets. A part of the functions of the prophets was to interpret the “signs of the times,” not as the prophets, themselves, might perceive their meaning but as God revealed their meaning to the prophets. Although some of these “signs” may have been political, social, economic, or military insights they almost always had a religious, ethical-moral, and spiritual basis, because the prophets were God’s spokesmen. However, these circumstances created easy opportunities for false prophets to arise.

These false prophets did not speak for God although they frequently claimed to do so. Instead they depended on their personal insight into the various political, economic, religious, or military situations at hand. They were more akin to soothsayers than to the true prophets of God. Most of the time they predicted things which were favorable to the people. In this way they gained great esteem in the minds of the populace. When Ahab inquired of his four hundred prophets just prior to the battle of Ramoth-Gilead he received a positive and encouraging answer. However when Micaiah was consulted he told Ahab the truth from God, which was something that Ahab did not want to hear, I Kgs. 22:1-8. There was a constant battle between the prophets of the Lord and the false prophets. The ordinary individual could have had a very difficult time determining if a prophet was speaking from God or simply from his own insights and desire to please his audience. One's biases frequently stand in his way as he tries to determine the will of the Lord vs. the messages of the false teachers. The book of Jeremiah highlights this conflict.

### **The historical background of Jeremiah**

One of the grandest reform movements in Judah's history came during the reign of Hezekiah. These reforms were religious, political, and nationalistic. In the ancient world, many pagan nations considered their kings to be direct representatives of the gods, and in some cases considered them to have divine components. Consequently, an attack against a king was frequently considered an attack on a nation's religious identity. Although Judah and Israel did not consider their kings divine, they identified themselves as God's chosen people and they believed that their nation and their God were inseparably tied together. The pure idea of theocracy was almost unknown during the period of the divided kingdom, but a true religious reformation could not escape the idea that the religious codes and practices of Israel came directly from God through Moses at Mt. Sinai. It is therefore difficult to divorce religious reforms from nationalistic components.

The reforms of Hezekiah were mostly destroyed by his evil son Manasseh, and God brought the armies of the Assyrians to invade Judah. The Assyrians took Manasseh prisoner and brought him to Babylon but he was later returned to Jerusalem, II Chron. 33:10-13. Amon, Manasseh's son, reigned twenty-two years and he continued the evil practices of his father. He was assassinated by some of his officials and they placed Josiah on the throne. See II Kgs. 21:19-26, II Chron. 33:21-25.

Josiah's regency spanned 640-609 B.C. (Jer. 1:1-3), and Jeremiah's ministry began in the thirteenth year of Josiah's reign. Thus, Jeremiah began his ministry in 627 B.C. Josiah was only eight years old when he became king and in the eighth year of his reign, when he was sixteen years old, "he began to seek the God of his father David." In about 628 B. C., the twelfth year of his reign, at twenty years old, Josiah began religious reforms, purging Jerusalem of its high places, burning the Asherah poles, and destroying the idols. The altars of Baal were torn down and the incense altars were cut in pieces. See II Chron. 34:1-7. Jeremiah appeared on the scene one year later. In the eighteenth year of Josiah's reign (622 B.C.), the book of the Law was found in the temple. Josiah, now twenty-six years old, greatly expanded the reforms, II Kgs. 22:1-10 and II Chron. 4:1-18. Since Jeremiah's work had begun in 627 B.C., the prophet had been working for five years prior to the discovery of the book of the Law. During this time, Assyria placed heavy tax levies on Judah, which caused the people to tire of foreigners controlling their lives.

Josiah's reforms, somewhat like those of Hezekiah's, probably had strong nationalistic dimensions. In addition, Josiah's reforms, like Hezekiah's, failed in the long run.

Even though Josiah's reforms were extensive, they may have been forced. Both Jehoahaz and Jehoiakim, Josiah's sons and successors were evil, and the people followed their lead back into the pagan practices which Josiah had earlier brought to an end. Therefore, it appears that the reforms did not change people's hearts, but, rather, that the people were simply following where their kings led. Jeremiah's writings and sermons describe this situation. He warned the people continually about the false assurances given by lying prophets among them as in Jer. 14:13-14.

The Babylonians destroyed Nineveh, Assyria's capital, in 612 B.C. However, the Assyrian army retreated to Haran where Ashur-uballit II (612-609 B.C.), a weak pretender king, tried to revive the Empire. Until 605 B.C., the Egyptians under Pharaoh Neco controlled a great deal of territory in northern Palestine and Syria. The Egyptian king knew that Palestine lay between him and the power of the Babylonian army. Therefore, in order to protect Egypt's political interests, he led his armies northward to engage the Babylonians at Carchemish where the Egyptians had a rather large military installation. Furthermore, Neco assisted Assur-uballit's fragmented armies in the battle against Nebuchadnezzar. In 609 B.C. as Pharaoh Neco was moving northward, Josiah went to Megiddo where he engaged the Egyptians in battle. Josiah was severely wounded in the encounter and was taken back to Jerusalem where he died (II Chron. 35:23-24). The Chaldeans under the leadership of Nebuchadnezzar defeated Egypt and Assyria at Carchemish in 605 B.C. bringing to an end all of the vestiges of the Assyrian-Egyptian alliance. This left the Chaldeans in firm control of most of the former vassals of Assyria, but Egypt continued to oppose the Babylonians and the expansion of Nebuchadnezzar's empire. Nebuchadnezzar reigned over the Babylonian Empire for forty-three years.

Upon the death of Josiah his son Jehoahaz became king, but he ruled only three months. According to I Chron. 3:15 and Jer. 22:11-12 it appears that Shallum was his personal name but he took the throne name of Jehoahaz. The Egyptians killed Josiah in the battle of Megiddo and they exercised some control over Judah although we do not know to what extent this control was effective. We do know that Pharaoh Neco returned from his failed expedition at Carchemish and deposed Jehoahaz, king of Judah, placing Eliakim, another son of Josiah on the throne. Neco changed Eliakim's name to Jehoiakim and Neco took Jehoahaz to Egypt. At that time the Egyptians imposed a levy of one hundred talents of silver and one talent of gold on Judah. See II Kgs. 23:31-35 and II Chron. 36:1-4.

Jeremiah began his ministry in 627 B.C. about fifteen years before the fall of Nineveh (612 B.C.) so he was working during the decline and demise of the Assyrian Empire and the rise of the Babylonians. Therefore, Jeremiah worked during the last eighteen years of Josiah's reign and another eighteen years. His ministry lasted just beyond the final invasion of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.

Jehoiakim ruled Judah for a total of eleven years, but when Nebuchadnezzar invaded Judah he became a vassal of Babylon and was forced to pay tribute money to the Babylonians. The account in II Kgs. 24:1-2 says that this invasion and the levy of tribute money took place "during Jehoiakim's reign" but it does not say when. After three years, Jehoiakim rebelled and refused to

pay the tribute money. Nebuchadnezzar invaded Judah again and took Jehoiakim to Babylon as a prisoner. (II Kgs. 24:1-7 and II Chron. 36:5-7). This is thought to have been about the year 602 B.C.

Jehoiachin, the son of Jehoiakim was made king of Judah at age eighteen, but he reigned only three months and ten days (II Chron. 36:9). The account in II Chron. 36:9-10 states that Nebuchadnezzar sent a group of officials to Judah in order to bring Jehoiachin to Babylon. This account almost sounds like a diplomatic move, but the account in II Kgs. 24:8-16 gives us additional information. That account says there was another invasion of Judah by the Babylonians. Their armies laid siege to Jerusalem and the city surrendered. Treasures of the temple were removed and carried to Babylon along with ten thousand exiles from among the craftsmen and artisans. Jehoiachin was also taken to Babylon as a prisoner along with the entire force of seven thousand fighting men leaving only the poor in Jerusalem. Mattaniah, Jehoiachin's uncle was made a puppet king and his name was changed to Zedekiah. See II Chron. 35:9-10 and II Kgs. 24:8-17. Zedekiah was evil in the sight of the Lord.

In the ninth year of his reign, Zedekiah rebelled against the Babylonians. Nebuchadnezzar invaded Judah again and began a two year siege of Jerusalem. The city fell in the eleventh year of Zedekiah's reign and he was taken prisoner to Babylon along with additional exiles. Jerusalem was completely destroyed and burned by the Babylonians. Nebuchadnezzar appointed Gedaliah governor of the people who were left behind—the poor, the uneducated, and the unskilled. II Kgs. 25.

The account in II Kgs. 25:8 says that the fall of Jerusalem took place in the nineteenth year, the fifth month, and the seventh day of Nebuchadnezzar's reign. Nebuzaradan, the commander of Nebuchadnezzar's imperial guard came into the city a little later and burned it. This took place in 586 B.C. The Babylonian Chronicle along with other archaeological discoveries gives extensive data which has enabled scholars to date the fall of Jerusalem quite accurately. The date of the final destruction of the city of Jerusalem turns out to be July 18, 586 B.C. See Jer. 39:2 and Jer. 52 which gives additional information about the fall of the city.

In the thirty-seventh year of the exile Jehoiachin was released from his Babylonian prison and Evil-Merodach, the new king gave him a seat of honor above all of the other kings who were captives in Babylon. See Jer. 52:31-33 and II Kgs. 25:27-30, which duplicates the statement in Jeremiah.

Several other prophets also worked during the time of Jeremiah. Zephaniah was probably a contemporary of Josiah and his son Amon. Nahum's ministry may also have overlapped a short portion of Jeremiah's ministry and Josiah's reign. Nahum does not identify the time of his ministry, but scholars generally place him shortly before the fall of Nineveh but not earlier than the fall of Thebes since the fall of Thebes is mentioned in the book of Nahum. Thus, Nahum's ministry could have come at any time during the fifty-one year period between 663 B.C., when Thebes fell and 612 B.C. when Nineveh fell. Therefore, he could have been contemporary with Josiah (640-609 B.C.) and Jeremiah whose ministry spanned the years from 627-586 B.C.



## **Judah, Babylon, and the Babylonian Chronicle**

The archaeological discovery and publication of the Babylonian Chronicle gives useful information on the military exploits of the Babylonians from 626 B.C. to 539 B.C. These cuneiform tablets speak of Babylon's incursion into the western most nations of the Middle East, including Nebuchadnezzar's invasion of Gaza, Ashkelon, and Moab and the battle of Carchemish. The chief task of Nebuchadnezzar, according to the Chronicle, was to pacify the conquered nations west of Babylon. Much of this was done simply by the presence of portions of the Babylonian army in those territories.

In II Kgs. 24:7-8 there is a statement that Babylon had taken over some Egyptian territory and for that reason the king of Egypt did not march out of his own country. Importantly, that the Babylonian Chronicle mentions other skirmishes and battles between Egypt and Babylon, at least one of which went in Egypt's favor. This information helps us understand the controversies among some of the people of Judah as to whether they should side with Egypt or Babylon. Some scholars believe that this might have been an important factor in the ultimate decision of some of the people to flee to Egypt, forcing Jeremiah to go with them, although he had warned against seeking help from Egypt. See Jer. 43:1-8.

During Nebuchadnezzar's fifth regnal year, between December 601 and April 600 B.C., the Babylonians took punitive action against Egypt, fighting a fierce battle against the Egyptian army. This period is believed to be the time when the Babylonians invaded Judah and took Jehoiakim prisoner to Babylon because he had refused to pay tribute (II Kgs. 24:1-4). The Babylonian Chronicle tells of Nebuchadnezzar's battle against the Egyptians in which the forces of Nebuchadnezzar suffered serious losses, and returned home quickly. At home they took time out to recover from their wounds and reorganize. The Chronicle also tells of another invasion of Judah by Nebuchadnezzar when he took the king prisoner. This was probably referring to the invasion spoken of in II Kgs. 24:8-17 and II Chron. 36:9-10 when Jehoiachin was taken prisoner by the Babylonians. According to the Chronicle this took place "in the seventh year, the month of Kislev." This places it at about the year 602 B.C. (Freedman, 1961, pp. 113-127.)

## **The Book of Jeremiah**

Scholars generally agree that the book of Jeremiah is not really a book in the normal sense of the word. It doesn't move from a beginning point toward an ending. Instead it is a collection of oracles, history, personal information, sermons, and autobiography. Portions were rewritten by Baruch, and other portions were destroyed by king Jehoiakim (Jer. 36:22-23). Unfortunately these topics are not arranged in an organized fashion, making the book just about impossible to outline except in a very broad sense. J.A. Thompson and most other commentators believe that it may have originally consisted of a number of shorter books (documents) which were collected and placed together in a miscellaneous fashion. One should not interpret this remark as a denial of the authentic character of the book however. Even a casual reading of the text will show that there is little topical, logical, or chronological arrangement. Attempts are made by scholars to determine the beginning and end of these small books, but these boundaries are not always evident.

Three distinct types of material are generally recognized by scholars. They have simply been labeled “A,” “B,” and “C.” The oracles of the prophet are almost always recorded in poetic form, and these are designated as type “A” material. The prose and narrative material, particularly the biographical and historical sections are designated as type “B” material. The speeches and discourses, most of which are prose rather than poetry are classified as type “C” material. In addition there are smaller sections which are generally referred to as the “confessions.” These are usually considered type “A” material but they don’t fit comfortably into any of the categories. The story of the destruction of portions of the original material (Jer. 36) discusses Jeremiah’s original work and his collaboration with Baruch in reconstructing what had been destroyed. We do not have any information concerning the time or method of collecting this material and forming a “book” out of the various writings.

### **The “confessions” of Jeremiah.**

Scholars are divided regarding the person(s) identified in the confessions, the intended meaning of the confessions, the character of the confessions, and in some cases, the authorship of the confessions. Craigie, *et. al.* list the following passages as the confessions along with the context and in some cases God’s answer. The following blocks are generally accepted by scholars: 11:18—12:6, 15:10-21, 17:12-18, 18:18-23, 20:7-13, 20:14-18. Various scholars also refer to these brief statements as Jeremiah’s laments or complaints. Generally, these sections express Jeremiah’s personal sufferings at the apostasy and evil of his nation, and they are sometimes directed to God, complaining about what the Lord has or has not done. A few commentators believe that the confessions represent, not Jeremiah’s own personal feelings, but those of his nation as he represents the people’s lament over their plight. This, however, seems to be contrary to the general condition of evil in Judah. In many ways, the confessions are similar to the laments of some of the psalmists as in Psalms 5, 7, 79, 80, etc. We can see the inner struggles of Jeremiah as he complains and confesses. The confessions are an integral part of the message of the prophet. They are not separate passages added by an outside editor or compiler. Instead, they express Jeremiah’s complete identification with the suffering of his people, and sorrow for their apostasy. Craigie, *et. al.* make the following observation: “Jeremiah identified with the community and participated in their suffering. He suffered with particular anguish because it was his inescapable duty to proclaim the approaching judgment. His anguish was real, all the more so because it did not arise from his personal suffering alone but was a reflection of the suffering of his people and the suffering of God.” (Craigie, *et. al.* 1991, on CD.)

## **Chapter II**

### **Jeremiah's Call and First Oracle**

#### **1:1—6:30**

#### **Introduction**

As we deal with the text of Jeremiah we will attempt to discuss an entire block of Scripture as a whole in addition to discussing particular verses or groups of verses. By doing this we hope to see the dominant thought of each section in its broader context but we will also see how certain verses provide important insights to the meaning of a section. Historical data and other considerations will be brought to bear on the text as deemed important.

#### **The superscription. 1:1-3**

The opening superscription gives us three items of important information: (1) Jeremiah's, personal details including his parentage, the fact that he was a priest, and the city of his birth, (2) his claim to the divine source of his ministry, and (3) the general time period of his ministry.

His father's name was Hilkiah which was a common name in Israel. We do not know anything else about his parentage. The name Hilkiah is generally associated with the high priest who discovered the book of the Law in the temple during the reforms of Josiah. However, there is no indication that Jeremiah was the son of the high priest. The name Jeremiah was also common among Israelites but none are prominent with the exception of Jeremiah the prophet. The meaning of the name is not clear but most scholars believe it means either "the Lord exalts," or "the Lord establishes."

He was a priest in his native city of Anathoth, a town on the edge of the tribe of Benjamin located only about four miles (6.4 km.) northeast of Jerusalem. The town is mentioned a number of times during the Divided Kingdom Period, but is never given any status. Jeremiah had to deal with the erroneous testimony of a number of false prophets during his ministry, but in the superscription he specifically claims to have received his call from the Lord.

His ministry began during the thirteenth year of Josiah (627 B.C.) and stretched through the fifth month of the eleventh year of Zedekiah (587 B.C.). It was at the conclusion of the reign of Zedekiah that Judah was taken into Babylonian exile. Thus, Jeremiah's ministry lasted a little over forty years. See the Introduction for details on the kings of Judah.

#### **The call of Jeremiah. 1:4-10**

Verse 4 says, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations." Similar expressions are used with Isaiah (Is. 49:1, 5) and Paul (Gal. 1:15). Although these are frequently thought of in terms of predestination, the responses of the prophets and Paul were acts of their own freewill. Jeremiah responded to God's call in much the same way as Moses responded at the burning bush. Both presented reasons why they could not do the work to which God had appointed them. Jeremiah said he was too young for this job. The Hebrew word translated "child" or "boy" actually may refer to a

young man in his twenties. We have no direct information as to his age at the time of his call. God's address to each of these men, Moses, Jeremiah, and Paul, gave them a sense of their mission in life.

God gave the prophet a mild rebuke telling him not to consider himself too young for this work. The Lord would protect him. There is a symbolic touching of Jeremiah's mouth (1:9-10) which meant that the Lord was putting his words into Jeremiah's mouth. A similar action had taken place with Isaiah (Is. 6:5-7). The Lord declared Jeremiah's work to him in vs. 10 where he said that the prophet was appointed to root up and tear down kingdoms and nations.

God said he had set Jeremiah "over nations and over kingdoms." Since Israel was supposed to consider God the sovereign of the universe, not just a local god, this would not have been thought of as out of bounds, but Jeremiah felt that his youth would be an impediment since eldership was considered synonymous with knowledge and wisdom. His ministry would primarily affect Judah, but the remainder of Israel, Assyria, Syria, Egypt, Babylon, and some smaller states also would be affected.

### **The first revelation from God. 1:11-19**

These verses constitute two visions. Verses 11-14 describe the visions and verses 15-19 give the Lord's meaning of the visions. Frequently the question is asked of various prophets, "What do you see?" Verses 11-12 form the first vision—that of an almond branch. The almond branch would have been familiar to the people of Anathoth since it was, and still is, a center for almond growing. The almond trees were among the first to blossom at the beginning of spring and it may be that the Lord uses this to say that he is alert and will carry out his purposes quickly.

Verses 13-14 form the second vision—that of a boiling pot leaning toward the north. Some commentators believe that there was a time span between these two visions, but nothing in the text necessitates this conclusion. In verses 15-19 the Lord explains the second vision, which is ominous. It is a warning that disaster would come to Judah from the north. Although Jeremiah doesn't directly designate the country involved, later in the book it becomes evident that Jeremiah is speaking of the Babylonian invasions of Judah. The nations become clear in later statements that kings would set up their thrones in Jerusalem, and that other towns in Judah would also suffer. The punishment was due to the people forsaking the Lord and worshipping idols which they had made with their own hands.

In verses 17-19 Jeremiah is instructed to get himself ready to do the work of proclamation to Judah. He was not to be afraid because the Lord had made him a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall. He would be protected by God when he stood before kings, priests, and the people of the land. They would fight against him, but they would not prevail.

### **Jeremiah's early oracles. Israel's guilt and punishment. 2:1—6:30**

J.A. Thompson calls attention to legal forms used by ancient kings, some of which are found in chapter 2 and in other parts of the Old Testament, including Micah 6:1-8. Generally, Biblical covenants followed ancient legal covenant forms. In addition, non-Biblical documents also refer

to these forms. When a lesser king (*e.g.* a puppet king or local monarch) offended his overlord the overlord would send a legal notice to the lesser monarch. The document usually contained five basic statements. (1) An appeal to the vassal to pay attention and heed the summons. (2) A series of questions which carried an implied accusation. (3) A statement of past benefits provided by the overlord. (4) A reference to the futility of ritual compliance or other kinds of aid. (5) The threat of judgment punishment for the violator. (Thompson, 1980, pp. 159-160.) Although Jeremiah does not follow this form explicitly and certain literary devices cover portions of the form, scholars generally view these passages in Jeremiah as representative of this form.

Chapter 2 contains all of these elements, though not in an organized fashion and not in the same order as stated above. (1) An appeal to the people of Judah to pay attention since Jeremiah is delivering the words of the Lord, vss. 1-2a and 12; (2) implied accusations in question form, vss. 5-6, 11-12 and 14-18; (3) past benefits, vss. 7-11, 13-14, 21-22, and 29-30; (4) the futility of seeking other gods, vss. 9-10, 19, and 26-28; and (5) God's warnings of the dire consequences of rebellion, vss. 26-37.

### **The first oracle: Israel's ancient fidelity and present idolatry. 2:1-13**

In 2:1-2a Jeremiah is told to deliver God's message to the people. Verses 2b-3 are the Lord's reminiscence of the past fidelity of Israel, and the verses are similar to those found in Hos. 11:1-4. Verses 4-13 form a bridge between Israel's original loyalty to the Lord and the present situation. This section is introduced by the statement, "This is the word of the Lord." In this section God questions the people about their forefathers' apostasy. In verse 8 four classes of leaders are condemned as being responsible for Israel's apostasy: the priests; those who deal with the law (legal authorities); the rulers; and the prophets. God basically asks three rhetorical questions. "Where did God go wrong? What fault did your forefathers find with God?" What did God do wrong that should have caused you forefathers to stray toward idolatry? These questions are followed by a reminder that God had blessed the Israelites by bringing them up from Egypt and settling them in a land of plenty. The response of Israel was to forget God, and the priests and prophets also went into idolatry. In verse 11 God asks, "Has any nation every changed its gods?" In the pantheon of polytheism worshipping many gods was common, but generally the national god remained the same. When pagans traveled to other countries, they might worship the god of the local country, but nations didn't change their gods. Yet, Judah as a nation had gone from the one true God to idols. This behavior did not just begin recently with Manasseh but had characterized the people ever since they left Egypt. God's conclusion is that Israel has changed gods, and that the Lord will hold them and their children responsible.

In verses 12-13 Jeremiah says that Judah had committed two offenses. First, they left God, the source of living water, and dug their own cisterns which were broken, and could not hold water. In a country such as Judah, which had much desert land, water was an especially valuable commodity, so this was a fitting illustration of Judah's departure from God.

### **The consequences of Israel's apostasy and the futility of idolatry. 2:14-28**

In 722 B.C. the Assyrians captured Samaria and took the northern kingdom of Israel captive. Assuming that this oracle was spoken at the beginning of Jeremiah's ministry (627 B.C.), Israel



fell about ninety-five years prior to this oracle. Nineveh fell in 612 B.C. bringing an end to the Assyrian Empire. Thus, Jeremiah probably spoke these words about fifteen years before the demise of the Assyrian Empire. In verse 18, both Assyria and Egypt are mentioned probably indicating that Assyria still had some influence and power when Jeremiah began his ministry. The Assyrian kings after Assurbanipal (669-633 B.C.) were all quite weak, so we know that Assyria's power was waning. The northern kingdom had become plunder for the Assyrians, and the prophet now calls attention to that. The land of Israel had become desolate and towns had been burned. The consequence of Israel's idolatry had been severe, and Judah was on the same track.

Memphis and Tahpanhes were both Egyptian cities. During the height of its power Assyria had conquered portions of Egypt. Why should God's people suffer the same fate as the pagan nations around them? "Your wickedness will punish you; your backsliding will rebuke you. Consider then and realize how evil and bitter it is for you when you forsake the Lord your God and have no awe for me." (2:19) Judah is warned about the consequences of sin.

After speaking of the consequences of apostasy our prophet moves to what J. Philip Hyatt calls "The Depth of Israel's sin." He says:

This section emphasizes the fact that Israel's sin is of long standing and deep rooted, and it multiplies figures of speech in Oriental fashion to express the idea. Israel is compared to: an animal that has broken its yoke (vs. 20a); a harlot (vs. 20b); a vineyard that was planted with choice vines, but produced only wild ones (vs. 21cf. Isa. 5:1-7); a person washing himself in vain with lye and soap (vs. 22); a young camel straying away from the herd, perhaps in heat (vs. 23); a wild ass in heat (vs. 24); and finally a thief (vs. 26).

(Hyatt, 1956, pp. 818-819.)

This section contains information which would be classified under statement #4 of the list given on the previous page. The greater King, God, is saying to the lesser king, the people and their rulers that they are reaching for other gods; their ritual compliance with pagan religious practices will be their downfall. Hosea had warned people about abandonment of the covenant, and Jeremiah reflects these same warnings. Verses 21-22 speak of grapes from a choice vine. The word used in verse 21 for "choice vine" refers to a red grape as mentioned also in Is. 5:2. Israel, however, became a wild vine. The stain which could not be washed off was Judah's guilt.

Judah's sin included the worship of Baal and Moloch. The worship of Baal involved sexual promiscuity, fertility rites, and sacred prostitution. The reference to the valley in vs. 23 may refer to the Valley of Ben-Hinnom as in 7:30-31, the location of the worship of Moloch and the human sacrifices which took place there. However these verses may be linked to the statements in verses 23-25 where Jeremiah uses figures of speech involving female camels and donkeys. Young female camels run back and forth and are very unreliable, unstable, and disorganized when their mating season comes. Also the young female donkeys become wild, uncontrollable, and even violent as they lustfully chase the male donkeys. Our prophet uses this to give us a very vivid picture of Judah's fickleness and lust for Baal worship with its immoral rites. God's people are acting like animals. (Thompson, 1980, p. 178. See also Harrison, 1973, on CD.)

A thief is disgraced when caught, and Jeremiah tells Judah that the nation cannot escape God's view and his punishment. Their false prophets, political leaders, and other officials are corrupt, immoral, and idolatrous, speaking to wood and stone as if these objects could hear and act on their requests. The comment about wood probably refers to Asherah poles which were symbols of the Canaanite goddess of fertility. God says he punished them in vain because they would not turn away from their idolatrous and immoral lives. Verse 28 has a note of sarcasm and ridicule in it as Jeremiah challenges Judah to talk to their pieces of wood and stone.

### **God's judgment against Judah. 2:29-37**

This section divides itself into two parts. Verses 29-30 speak of a court scene where God asks why Judah brings indictments against him. This is a legal expression. He speaks of how his punishment of the people has been designed to bring them to their senses and induce them to return to fidelity but to no avail. The fault was not with God, but with Israel. In the secular realm when a king visited a vassal because of rebellion or violation he brought a warning that if the vassal did not correct its behavior there would be severe consequences. Israel, however, ignored the warnings of the Lord, and she would ultimately suffer the consequences of her action.

Verses 31-37 are God's warnings, beginning with the injunction, "You of this generation, consider the word of the Lord." God has not been a desert land to them but he provided for their every need as long as they were faithful. The unreasonableness of their rejection is illustrated by the rhetorical question concerning a bride forgetting the day of her wedding. Israel pursues love, but they have rejected the source of love. They have become numb to their own sins. They have abused the innocent poor and failed to admit their own guilt. Israel has said, "We will never come back to you." Sin and rebellion have ways of capturing the conscience of sinners who constantly excuse themselves for their evil deeds. Their arrogant words are "I am innocent," and "I have not sinned." Hardness of heart (Heb. 3:13) and the searing of the conscience (I Tim. 4:2) are signs of deep departure from God. This was Israel's state of affairs.

Josiah's reforms began in his twelfth regnal year (about 628 B.C.) and Jeremiah came on the scene about a year later. Thus, if this oracle took place in the early part of Jeremiah's ministry, Josiah's reforms were just getting underway at this time. The book of the Law was discovered six years later during the eighteenth year of Josiah's reign, about 622 B.C. Throughout chapter 2, there are indirect references to the idea of forgetting God's covenant, as illustrated by the bride forgetting her wedding attire.

### **The second oracle: God's call for Judah's repentance. 3:1—4:4**

This section generally is thought of as a separate oracle in the first group of oracles (2:1—4:4), since much of the message contains the same instructions and condemnations. The section contains a passionate plea for repentance.

Verse 1 introduces the legal terms of marriage, divorce and remarriage forming a sort of basis for the warnings to follow. In Deut. 24:1-4, the writer says that if a man divorces his wife and she marries another man but is later divorced from him also that she cannot return and remarry her original husband. Jeremiah uses this law metaphorically to show that Judah has left God (her

husband) to serve other gods (other husbands), and that the people have no real right to come back to the Lord. He does not use this situation as an absolute, but to show the evil of Israel's apostasy. Their unfaithfulness gives them no real right to return to the Lord. However, God still reaches out to them because of his love for his people. The entire section might show that the reforms of Josiah did not bring about a change of heart, but only changes in behavior. The section may partially answer why the reforms did not last.

Israel is pictured as a prostitute who waits at the roadside for a lover to come to her or as a nomad sitting in the desert. Even when God withheld the rain and punished them they failed to repent. The statement in verses 4-5 seems to say that the people were following the ways of Baal but at the same time were professing false allegiance to the Lord – you call me “Father.”

Some commentators believe that the material following verse 5 should actually be arranged as follows: 3:19-25, 4:1-4, and 3:6-18 because it would flow more naturally. (Bright, 1965, p. 19.) Thompson and others however believe that this type of division does not give legitimate consideration to the differences in western logical thought compared with ancient eastern thought which does not necessitate such connections. Ancient middle easterners, according to Thompson, had no trouble skipping into a different thought pattern and returning to their original material. (Thompson, 1980, pp. 188-189.)

The text frequently oscillates between poetry and prose. 3:6-12a is prose but 12b-13 is poetry. 3:14-18 is prose again but 3:19—4:9 is poetry. The short passage from 4:10-12 goes back to prose but 4:13—5:17 is poetry. In 5:18-19 the prophet reverts to prose but in 5:20—6:30 he goes back to poetry. Some scholars have contended that these movements back and forth from poetry to prose indicate different authorship, but others believe that Jeremiah was capable of both literary styles. Alternating between poetry and prose is not a phenomenon restricted to Jeremiah since we see it frequently in Isaiah, Ezekiel, Hosea and others. It may indicate that the passages were written at different times, but we have no real evidence of this either.

In 3:6-11 the prophet says that he is delivering the Lord's words given to him during the reign of Josiah. This block deals with a comparison of Judah and Israel. John Bright labels it “Two Bad Sisters.” Israel is labeled faithless and her sins are described in some detail. God appealed to Israel to return to him but they failed to do so and were taken captive by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. Jeremiah wrote these words about ninety-four years later, and Judah may have forgotten about Israel's wickedness during the intervening years.

After discussing Israel, Jeremiah then describes Judah's unfaithfulness. In a striking metaphor, Jeremiah says that the Lord gave faithless Israel a certificate of divorce and sent her away. Judah saw the evil of Israel and God's punishment of their sister nation, but the people of Judah took no action to clean up their own lives. Jeremiah warns unfaithful Judah that the same fate would come to her as came to faithless Israel. The prophet goes even further stating that Judah's reforms were only a pretense. Perhaps this is a sad commentary on the fact that the reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah never succeeded in changing the hearts of the people, but only brought temporary changes in their behavior. Manasseh, although Hezekiah was a godly father, turned out to be one of the most evil kings in Judah's history, and the kings who followed Josiah were also

evil and idolatrous. True repentance is God's toughest commandment because it deals primarily with changes of heart, rather than just changes in behavior.

In 3:12b-13 the Lord says, "Faithless Israel is more righteous than unfaithful Judah." The prophet proclaims a message to the north, no doubt intended for the captive people of the northern kingdom now under Assyrian control. The Lord says, "Return faithless Israel...I will frown on you no longer, for I am merciful." The theme continues in 3:14-18, but the style changes to prose. The call to return and be forgiven is a statement of God's intention for Israel. He always urged his people to be holy and faithful so that they might live in peace and prosperity in the land. He reminded them that he was their husband, and would give them shepherds to lead them gently. The prophet paints an ideal picture of what God wants Israel and Judah to be. These expressions reflect covenant ideas used by the Lord even though Israel had broken the covenant.

God describes the beauty of his remade relationship with his people if they return as he admonished them to do in verse 12b. He shows that this relationship is still a possibility because he is a merciful and forgiving God. This passage and similar passages in Jeremiah and Isaiah are used by some to support the theory that Israel will return to its own country at the time of the second coming of Christ. However, we must notice two things. First, the prophet is referring to the return of Israel from the Assyrian captivity but this is conditioned on the second part of the statement. It is a summons for them to return to the Lord in repentance. The comment that there would be a chosen one from each city and two from each clan shows that this is not a massive return but only a small remnant. Israel's return to "Zion" (Jerusalem) from the nations to which they had been scattered demonstrates God's intention to reunite the two segments of the nation. The united nation would have shepherds after God's own heart.

Jeremiah's appeal is based not on the goodness of the people, but on God's grace—his willingness to forgive. In speaking of the character of Jeremiah, Thompson makes an interesting observation: "He could be a prophet of grace just because he took God's judgment seriously. Lesser prophets, the optimistic popular prophets, did not accept the fact of judgment and so could not understand the operation of grace after judgment (cf. 27:16, 28:2-4). For them there was no judgment but the continual operation of 'cheap grace.'" (Thompson, 1980, p. 202.) Thompson's use of "cheap grace" comes from Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, English Translation, pp. 37-49.

Jeremiah uses an unusual approach in verse 16 where he speaks of the Ark of the Covenant. He says it will not be thought of or missed, and another will not be made. The prophet is not ignoring the importance of the Ark, but is showing that symbols will be replaced with holy living. Paganism deifies wood, stone, and other materials, and objects become the essence of the presence of their gods. The Ark was never intended to be the essence of God's presence, but only symbolic. Jeremiah says that the attention and focus of the people will not be on things or objects, but on personal holiness. Unfortunately, many Israelites did not have a true heartfelt return to the Lord.

### **The need for a change of heart. 3:19—4:4**

There is a certain amount of musing on God's part in portions of this block. He is imagining Is-

rael's return to him, and even has Israel speaking of its return to fidelity. The scene seems to be one of a forsaken husband imagining the possibility of his wife returning to him.

Verses 19-25 tell of God's anxiousness to forgive Israel and to treat the people as his own sons, but the verses are mixed with a metaphor of marriage to an unfaithful wife. God thought that as a son his people would call him "Father" and not turn away. Instead they acted as an unfaithful wife.

Verses 21-22a appear to be God's thoughts regarding the possibility of Israel's repentance and his own demand for true repentance. Verses 22a-25 have been taken in two opposite ways. One opinion is that the section represents a genuine statement from Israel as she repents. Some commentators take this to be Israel's psalm of repentance interspersed with the Lord's demand for true repentance in 3:22a and 4:1-4. Another opinion is that the section represents God's wishful thinking as he imagines Israel coming back to him. Is Jeremiah describing a real happening or the expression of God's hope for his people? The fact that 4:1 begins with the word "If" indicates that God is speaking conditionally. Three times he uses the word in 4:1-2. It is not a certainty that Israel *will* return. Linguists say that the form of the word translated "will return" is such that it can be translated as "will return," "may return," or "should return." This statement then appears to be more an expression of God's wish and desire than the reality of Israel's repentance. In 4:3-4 God exhorts them to "break up your unplowed ground" indicating that he does not want them to work again in the same unfertile soil which represents their past lives of idolatry and immorality. They were to circumcise their hearts, not just their flesh, as a sign of the covenant they have with God. Paul uses the same symbol in Rom. 2:29. The practice of circumcision was never intended to be simply a mark in the flesh, but rather it was to be an act of the heart and acknowledgement that the individual belonged to God. It was an outward sign of an inward reality.

In this "confession" Israel is pictured enumerating a group of its deceptions and faults. The high places truly offer no hope nor do the idolatrous commotions. Instead, salvation is found in the Lord. The people of Israel confess that they have followed shameful gods from their youth. Many commentators believe that the words "shame" and "shameful" are used by Jeremiah to identify Baal. The word "abomination" is used in I-II Kings to identify a variety of gods. In remorse and repentance Israel is pictured as saying "Let us lie down in our shame and let our disgrace cover us. We have sinned against the Lord our God." (3:25)

In 4:1-4 the Lord answers. Whether the previous confession is the rhetorical wish of the Lord or a real confession of repentance of Israel, God's answer is one of forgiveness and compassion. Throughout this dialogue the emphasis is on sin, change of heart, and obedience as they seek to return to the Lord and renew the covenant.

### **God's judgment against Judah. 4:5—6:30**

The block of text from 4:5—6:30 presents some date problems. Since the book is not arranged in a strict chronological fashion commentators are divided as to when these oracles took place. Opinions range from the reign of Josiah to the reign of Zedekiah, thus, some believe that the oracles came fairly early in Jeremiah's ministry while others believe that they came toward the very



end. The exact time is not the important thing, rather the fact that God has told Judah that her refusal to repent will bring disaster to the nation is what matters. We will look at the various sections of this block.

### **The threat of invasion from the north. 4:5-10**

The nations to the north generally were a greater threat to Judah than those to the south. Israel had been taken captive in 722 B.C. by the Assyrians, Babylon was a rising threat, and Syria had been a threat in the past as an invader of Israel. Egypt alone was the southern threat. The Greek historian Herodotus mentions the power of the Scythians during the general period following the fall of Nineveh and some commentators believe that they were the possible threat of which Jeremiah is speaking. The Scythians came from the north shore of the Black Sea and their southeastern border joined Armenia. They were a marauding nomadic people especially known for their ruthlessness. Other scholars such as Thompson call attention to the fact that the Scythians were quite disorganized, and do not seem to fit the description of the powerful nation(s) Jeremiah is describing. Most scholars therefore believe that the Babylonians are the source of the threat. This conclusion would probably date the oracle later in Jeremiah's ministry, perhaps during the reign of Jehoiakim. (Thompson, 1980, *op.cit.* pp. 86-87.)

The scene is vivid. The sounding of the trumpet was a signal of grave danger, frequently military action, and those in the country areas would want to flee to the fortified (walled) cities for protection. The invading nation(s) is described as a lion coming out of his lair (his hiding place) in search of prey. Both Assyria and Babylon made extensive use of the lion symbol to illustrate their power. Such symbols appear in many of the archaeological excavations in both countries.

We should also notice that God was to be the source of this threat – emphasizing his actions in history. However the Lord offers hope if they will turn back to him. The people are urged to mourn over their sins and put on sackcloth (a rough garment worn when people were in great sorrow or repentance). Sackcloth was generally worn in direct contact with the skin with no undergarment to make it more comfortable. “That day” is described as one in which the kings and officials would lose heart, prophets would be appalled, and priests would be horrified.

Jeremiah's reaction to God's proclamation and warning is interesting. He accuses the Lord God of deceiving the people. God had promised peace but a sword was at their throats. In referring to Jeremiah's experience at the potter's house (Jer. 18:1-10), Paul says, “But who are you O man to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to him that formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’” (Rom. 9:20-21). Because of its character, some commentators believe that the statement in Jeremiah 4:9 was added by a later editor. However, most believe that he is reflecting the promises of the false prophets in 4:9 and that he is speaking of God's allowing the false prophets to lead the people astray because they wanted to listen to promises of peace instead of the reality of God's warnings. The prophet describes this situation as God's own deception of the people.

### **The blazing winds of judgment and Jeremiah's anguish. 4:11-18**

Jeremiah continues the theme of God's judgment by offering the symbol of scorching winds. The attacking nation(s) is pictured as a fierce wind, too strong to cleanse or winnow. The an-

cient people used the wind to carry away the chaff from the threshing floors, but the Lord assures them that the wind of which he now speaks is a devastating force. Symbolically it will carry away not only the chaff (the bad) but also the wheat (the useful). It will bring chariots coming like a whirlwind and horses swifter than eagles. Vivid descriptions have been given by numerous authors attempting to picture the devastating character of these desert winds. Such winds are described as blazing hot and fierce picking up the desert sands to blank out the sun and turn the sky into a dark grey, hiding the hills and even the mountains a mile away. A special name is attached to this kind of fierce winds – the sirocco – the wind of judgment. Jeremiah uses this symbolism to describe the size and strength of the armies which would come to destroy his beloved nation. However, as a compassionate and forgiving Father God offers a glimmer of hope. Jerusalem can be saved but she must wash evil from her heart in repentance.

In verse 15 a message comes from Dan in the far northern part of Israel and from Ephraim symbolic of the entire northern kingdom. It is as if those of the kingdom of Israel now speaks to Judah. Israel, which was taken captive by Assyria in 722 B.C., now speaks as “the voice of experience” warning Judah of her coming fate if she does not repent. The misery of the brothers of Judah was bitter indeed because they had brought all of this on themselves. Jeremiah says, “Tell this to the nations, proclaim it to Jerusalem: ‘A besieging army is coming from a distant land raising a war cry against the cities of Judah. They surround her like men guarding a field because she has rebelled against me,’ declares the Lord.” (4:16).

#### **Jeremiah’s confession. 4:19-22**

The Lord’s description and warning to Judah is followed in 4:19-22 by a statement of Jeremiah’s own anguish. His love for his countrymen as they continue in their rebellion brings the deepest sorrow to the prophet. These verses, and others like them, are generally referred to as Jeremiah’s confessions. These confessions are unique among the prophetic books because of the inclusion of the prophet’s own personal statements. There are about eight confessions with scholars differing in identifying some of them. They are not confessions of his own sins but are passages giving us a glimpse into the heart of the prophet. These confessions are very personal, sensitive, loving, and compassionate describing the great sorrow of the prophet as he sees the apostasy of his countrymen. In some of these confessions he carries on a dialogue with the Lord revealing his own inward struggles and his true humanity. He exhibits great empathy with the people as he warns them of their coming national disaster. The book of Lamentations describes these emotions quite fully. These confessions have gained Jeremiah the title of “the weeping prophet.” Craigie, *et al.* make the following comment concerning Jeremiah:

A public figure such as Jeremiah has two faces: that which is seen by the general public, and that of the private life. Jeremiah’s public face was a stern one, for he spoke of God’s coming judgment and the future devastation of his nation and land. But the private thoughts of a man cannot be read from the public face, nor can the internal anguish be discerned from the severity of external appearance. The preceding sections, describing the advance of God’s instrument of judgment, are stern and almost ruthless in substance. These verses of confession illuminate the internal torment of a man who is torn, precisely because he is himself so gripped by the urgency of his public preaching. He is not stern in public because he is heartless; it is

because he loves his nation and people so dearly that he speaks the severe word, but it takes a terrible toll on his own emotional life.

(Craigie, *et al.*, 1991, on CD)

### **An oracle of the coming destruction. 4:23-30**

Jeremiah describes the devastation of the nation. Some people flee to a hiding place in a thicket, others hide amidst the rocks. The towns and cities are deserted. The prophet chides the people by asking them about their luxurious dressing, wearing jewels of gold, and adorning themselves with cosmetics. Ancient women of the Middle East carefully painted the corners of their eyes to make them appear large and attractive (4:30). Statuary, paintings, and descriptions of the practices have been uncovered by archaeologists. Jeremiah asks them where their extravagant lifestyle has finally led. Those they wanted to attract (their lovers) now despise them and seek to kill them. The nation is gasping for its breath, but all to no avail.

### **The streets of Jerusalem. 5:1-9**

Before the prophet returns to the foe coming from the north (5:15) he continues to describe the apostasy and evil of his countrymen. From the earlier “confession” (4:19-22) we know his sorrow as he delivers this message.

The fourth chapter closes with the confession of Jeremiah following which the Lord speaks to him again. “Go up and down the streets of Jerusalem, look around and consider, search through her squares. If you can find but one person who deals honestly and seeks the truth, I will forgive this city.” (5:1) This statement is symbolic of the total apostasy of God’s people. A similar idea is found a century later in the tale of Diogenes, the famous Greek philosopher who bemoaned the lack of integrity in his own country. During the mid fourth century B.C. Diogenes carried a lamp though Athens and other Greek cities symbolically searching for one honest man. God told Jeremiah that he would spare the city of Jerusalem if one person of integrity and truth was found. This statement is reminiscent of Abraham and his search for ten righteous people in Sodom. The people of Jerusalem continued to swear by the Lord, “As surely as the Lord lives,” yet their oaths meant nothing for they were still swearing falsely. Although there were multiple types of evil present among the people, Jeremiah placed a premium on integrity. Jerusalem did not heed the warnings of the Almighty.

Jeremiah believes that the poor are in apostasy because they do not know better (5:4-5). Thompson believes that their poverty is not the lack of wealth, but the lack of knowledge. He bases this conclusion on the historical context which says they are fools and do not know the way of the Lord. The prophet says that surely the leaders will know the way of the Lord, and perhaps they will see the light and change. (Thompson, 1980, pp. 237-238.) To Jeremiah’s dismay, however, the leaders have broken the covenant and have no intention of submitting their lives to the Lord, (5:5). Once again symbolic animals come in to describe the consequences coming to Judah. Verses 7-9 pose two questions. “Why should I forgive you?” and “Should I not punish them for this?” Justice (punishment) is the logical answer to wrong doing, but forgiveness, which triumphs over justice, is the grace of God offered to those who turn back to him in true repentance,

a change of heart. In one sense, grace and forgiveness are illogical. Failure to recognize this principle leads to a misunderstanding of both grace and forgiveness.

Jeremiah frequently used adultery to symbolize Judah's apostasy, but in verses 8-9 he speaks directly of physical immorality, speaking of the men of Judah as "lustful stallions each neighing after another man's wife." The pagan religions of the Middle East had a strong emphasis on sexual rituals. W.F. Albright says that combined with the immoral sexual rites of their religions, the goddesses of fertility were also the goddesses of war, and are shown committing all sorts of acts of savagery. "Goddesses of fertility play a much greater role among the Canaanites than they do among any other ancient people." (Albright, 1957, p. 233). In all of these descriptions Jeremiah is describing a socially and religiously decadent society for which he sees little hope.

### **The folly of depending on false prophets. 5:10-19**

This section begins (vs. 10) and ends (vss. 18-19) with the statement that Judah is not going to be completely destroyed. The vine will not be destroyed, but the branches which have not produced the fruit of righteousness will be stripped off. The people would have been very familiar with this symbolism. They had convinced themselves that no evil would come to them. The cry of the people was to let the punishment of which God's prophets were speaking come on the prophets themselves because "'No harm will come to us; we will never see sword or famine. The prophets are but wind and the word is not in them, so let what they say be done to them.'" (vss. 12-13). God's reply is that the word will become fire in the mouth of Jeremiah, and the people will become the wood to be consumed.

The punishment for Judah is going to be from a nation which is ancient and enduring, whose language Judah did not understand. Although he does not identify the nation, there can be little doubt that he is speaking of the Babylonians. In verse 17, Jeremiah notes that their "quivers are like an open grave." Commentators are divided about the meaning of the "open grave." Perhaps it is referring to their great store of arrows. Their "ammunition" is so abundant that it never runs out. Or, perhaps, Jeremiah is speaking of the effectiveness of the invaders whose aim and military skills are so effective that they can fill the open graves with dead bodies. Not only will they defeat the people, but they will devour the land, the food harvest, their sons and daughters, their flocks, vines and trees, and in the end, their cities.

Verses 18-19 change from poetry to prose, and assure the recipients that there is not going to be a complete destruction of the people and their land. Many commentators believe that these verses are an addition made by an ancient editor during the Babylonian Exile, but the doctrine of a remnant is found frequently in the earlier prophets when speaking of the coming invasion by Babylon. The destruction, though described as devastating, would not be complete.

### **God's warning to his rebellious but complacent people. 5:20-31**

With a familiar injunction, Jeremiah is told to declare the above message to the house of Jacob and Judah. The prophet then addresses Judah as a "foolish and senseless people, who have eyes but do not see, who have ears but do not hear," 5:20-21. This expression reminds us of a similar condemnation given by Isaiah and quoted by Jesus. See Is. 6:9-10 and Matt. 13:13-15.

Ancient paganism pictured the gods in conflict with what they perceived as monstrous chaos. As a result pagans had a god for almost every force of nature and parts of the earth – the storms, the sea, the mountains, the valleys, the rain, etc. The Lord constantly challenges this view by emphasizing his sovereignty and his complete power over all of the forces of nature and the entire universe. In 5:22 he asks, “Should you not fear me declares the Lord. Should you not tremble at my presence?” The use of the sea in the same verse is especially significant because the ancient people saw it as the essence of the monstrous chaos. Baal was considered the god who controlled the rain, storm, and sea. By contrast Jeremiah mentions that it is the Lord who controls the boundaries of the sea and the seasons of the year. (5:22-24) In verse 25 he asserts that it is their wrongdoings which have kept prosperity from them. In all of this they have shown their complacency toward God and have ignored their own rebellion. They have grown fat and sleek and their evil deeds have no limits. Their houses are full of deceit, they do not plead the cases of the poor, and they ignore the fatherless. Their prophets prophesy lies and the priests rule by their own authority. The essence of these comments is that the people have completely lost touch with the Lord. As a rhetorical question God asks, “Should I not punish them for this?”

### **The sounds of war and the siege of Jerusalem. 6:1-30**

Chapter 6 describes the coming siege of the holy city. Because this is such a vivid portrayal many commentators believe it was given, not during the reign of Josiah but probably just shortly before the final onslaught of Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians in 587 B.C. There were numbers of Babylonian incursions into the land of Judah prior to the final siege of Jerusalem, but the description in chapter 6 certainly describes the destruction of the city. See the “Introduction to Jeremiah.”

Commentators do not agree on how this chapter should be divided. The following divisions seem to be the best. First there is the warning to Jerusalem (6:1-8) followed by a description of God’s wrath against the city for its evil (6:9-15). A discussion of substituting ritual for holiness of life is presented next (6:16-21), followed by a vivid description of the warfare of the foe to the north (6:22-26). Finally we have the Lord appointing Jeremiah as the “tester of metals” and God’s people as the ore (6:27-30). Jerusalem’s fate is sealed, and the only hope for the people is to flee the city. Although Jeremiah always holds out hope for the people if they return, there is an underlying understanding that the people will not return prior to experiencing God’s punishment.

### **Warning: Jerusalem under siege. 6:1-8**

In this oracle, Jeremiah begins to picture Jerusalem under siege by the foe from the north as described in 4:5-6 and elsewhere. The city of Anathoth, Jeremiah’s hometown, was on the border of Benjamin and Judah, and only a few miles from Jerusalem. The people of Benjamin, Jerusalem, and those in small towns were told to flee. It seems that the only safety was to be found in the hills and deserts. In 1935 the Lachish Letters were discovered by archaeologists, describing how ancient armies of Mesopotamia and Palestine used fire signals in war. This is probably what is being referred to in 6:1 concerning “the signals over Beth Hakkerem.”



The city of Jerusalem, described as the beautiful “daughter of Zion” will soon have shepherds and flocks of foreigners (the invading military commanders and their soldiers) surrounding it and completely taking it over (6:2-3). Jeremiah warns the people that they must prepare for the battle. Battles usually began early in the morning, and by evening the soldiers quit fighting and rested so they could continue the battle the next day. In this instance, however, Jeremiah says that the darkness of night will not deter the soldiers. They will continue the fight into the night. In verse 4, where the writer says that they are to prepare for battle, there may be a reference to religious ritual preparation as well as to military preparation. Pagans frequently consulted astrologers or pagan oracles and offered ritual sacrifices to the gods prior to a battle. Jeremiah may be using sarcasm here to mock the allegiance of the people to Baal and chastises them to follow their adopted pagan practices.

In verse 2, the Lord said, “I will destroy the Daughter of Zion,” and in verses 4-8 he gives orders to the enemy to carry out this destruction. Jeremiah pictures the Lord speaking to the enemy forces and telling them to prepare their siege of the city. From the point of view of the inhabitants of Jerusalem this would reinforce God’s resolve to punish his apostate people by destroying the city and taking the people captive. Verse 6 gives us a little glimpse into the use of siege warfare. In order to set up battering rams a ramp was built next to the wall of the city under attack. A foundation of trees and large stones was first laid and the ramp itself was then built on that foundation. God is determined to punish Jerusalem and its people for their evil lives and their continual violation of the covenant. Yet, in verse 8 he offers a glimmer of hope once again.

### **The evil of the people described. 6:9-15**

Although interpretations of this section vary, most commentators such as Thompson, Bright, and Hyatt believe that vs. 9 is a dialogue between Jeremiah and the Lord in which the Lord is telling the prophet to go out and rub his hand over the branches of the vines to see if there are any grapes left for the gleaners. There will be nothing left; their “vine” will be picked clean. God will completely destroy Jerusalem. (Thompson, 1980, pp. 257-258, Bright, 1965, pp. 47-50, and Hyatt, 1956, pp. 859-860.) In this illustration, God is speaking of the complete demise of the northern kingdom of Israel but he is warning the people of Judah that the same fate is in store for them. The prophet says that the problem is that no one is listening to the word of the Lord. In verse 10 where he says “their ears are closed” the word translated “closed” is the word for “uncircumcised.” See also Acts 7:51 where Stephen uses a similar expression.

In this section, the prophet admits that he is full of wrath from the Lord and that he cannot hold it in. In verse 11b the Lord tells Jeremiah to pour it out on everyone – the children on the street, the young men, husbands and wives. The prophet is to tell them that their houses will be turned over to others, their fields and even their wives will become the possessions of foreigners from the north. Verses 13-15 give a vivid description of the corruption of Judah. They treat their apostasy from the Lord as an unimportant event, not realizing that they are dressing a serious wound as if it were only a small nick in the skin – not serious. They shout as if they had the assurance of peace, but there is no true peace on the horizon. They have no shame at all and they have lost the quality of blushing at that which is shameful. The consequence is that they will fall and be brought down. Craigie, *et al.* make the following observation: “When evil is pursued and practiced regularly and devotedly, it produces eventually a moral blindness in the perpetrator.

And so, the divine oracle concludes, given the widespread and rampant nature of the whole nation's evil, all would fall in the coming day of judgment." (Craigie, *et al.*, 1991, on CD.)

### **The ancient paths vs. ritual observance. 6:16-21**

Jeremiah again addresses one of the major pitfalls of Judah and Israel (as well as cotemporary mankind). It is the fallacy that as long as we offer the proper sacrifices and observe the proper rituals we have fulfilled our "religious obligations" and all is well with the Lord. For contemporary society this translates into the simple statement, "I go to church every Sunday, take the Lord's Supper, and make a generous contribution. Therefore all is well between the Lord and me." In this way, both Judah and contemporary mankind fall into the same trap.

Jeremiah opens this portion of the oracle by exhorting the people to seek the old paths which constitute the good way. The people rejected the idea of the old paths. God answered by giving them watchmen to warn them but again they paid no attention to the trumpet of warning. Many commentators believe that this oracle probably came after the reforms of Josiah, because a definitive line is drawn between empty ritual observance and obedience to covenant law. The people seemed to think that a more elaborate ritual would satisfy the Lord's demands. When the prophet told the people to walk in the old path they said, "We will not walk in it" (6:16) and the exhortation to heed the warning of the trumpet was met with the response, "We will not listen" (6:17). Verses 18-21 therefore give fair warning of the coming disaster. God's reason for this is explained in verse 20 where he says he is not pleased with their sacrifices and their incense. The earlier prophets made constant mention of these same principles. See Isaiah 1:13-14, Hosea 6:6, Amos 4:1-5, Micah 6:1-8.

### **The terrible foe from the North. 6:22-26**

Once again we meet this terrible foe from the north which no doubt refers to the Babylonians. A portion of this poem (vss. 22-23) also appears in 50:42. There are several such doublets found in the book.

In verse 23 he speaks of their armor being bows and spears. Thompson says that the word translated "spear" has been generally thought of as a javelin type of weapon, but this is now considered to be a mistake. Thompson and other commentator, including Craigie, *et al.* cite Yigael Yadin's, *The Scroll of the War of the Sons of Light Against the Sons of Darkness* to show that this was a "short sword" which was very versatile and was commonly used by infantry and cavalry troops in the ancient Middle East. The army from the north is vividly described as a roaring sea, they are cruel and merciless, they ride horses, and they come in fighting formations. Cavalry warfare was used as early as the twelfth century B.C. by the Assyrians, Scythians, and other Middle Eastern nations. (Thompson, 1980, pp. 263-264, and Craigie, *et al.* 1991, on CD.)

Verses 24-25 describe the panic and paralysis of the people of God when they see this terrible threat. Their hands hang limp and helpless, they are gripped with pain. The scene is so terrible and fearsome that they are unable to respond. The people are petrified at what they see and are as helpless as a woman in labor. They are told not to go outside for fear that the sword of the enemy would devour them. There is terror on every side. It might be that Jeremiah's oracle con-

tains a little irony here. After Israel crossed the Red Sea the Song of Moses contains a statement of the fear which Israel would strike in the minds of the nations when the Lord's people entered the Promised Land as conquerors. "The nations will hear and tremble; anguish will grip the people of Philistia. The chiefs of Edom will be terrified, the leaders of Moab will be seized with trembling, the people of Canaan will melt away; terror and dread will fall upon them." Ex. 15:14-15. Now the prophet sees the situation reversed. Israel itself is stricken with fear with the threat of the "foe from the north.

Verse 26 does not read like an appeal to the people for repentance. Instead, it is a picture of the grim reality of those who are in mourning. In such circumstance they would carry out the customary practice of putting on sackcloth and rolling in ashes to express the depth of their sorrow at the loss of their only son. The death of the only son meant that the family would have no descendants since the genealogy was counted through the male descendants rather than the female. This was considered a terrible catastrophe in Israel and other Middle Eastern nations. It is with these images that the demise of Judah and Jerusalem is described. The destroyer has suddenly come upon them and there is no protection anywhere.

### **Jeremiah, a tester of his people. 6:27-30**

Jeremiah is searching for precious metal among his people. He was appointed a tester of metals, and the people are the ore. In this brief dialogue between the Lord and his prophet Jeremiah tests the conduct of Judah only to see that they are hardened rebels going about to slander. Verse 28 is thought by some commentators to be Jeremiah's report to the Lord. On the other hand it may be God's own observation of the process and its results. He finds that the people are as hardened as bronze and iron and they act corruptly. Back in 5:1 Jeremiah is told to walk the streets of Jerusalem and search for a person of integrity and truth. If even one could be found the Lord would forgive the city. None was found.

In verses 29-30 he describes the scene of a metallurgist at work. The bellows blows air into the fiery furnace to intensify the heat, melting the precious metal from its ore. He hopes to find pure metal but the metallurgist is disappointed when he finds only inferior worthless metal. Ancient metallurgists added lead to the crucible with the silver ore. When it was heated in the refiner's furnace the lead became oxidized and served to collect the impurities as the metal was separated from the ore. This resulted in a pure product. The Lord applies this image to Judah finding that nothing of value has resulted from the divine refining process. The Lord tried to separate Judah from the impurities within the nation, thus producing a useful product. Instead the Refiner (God) found that only impure metal had been produced.

## Chapter III

### The Temple Sermon

7:1—8:3

#### Introduction

Scholars differ concerning the exact length of the Temple Sermon. John Bright, J.A. Thompson, J. Philip Hyatt and others believe that the sermon, as we have it in 7:1-15, is probably only a fragment of the original. (See Bright, 1965, pp. 52-59, Thompson, 1980, pp. 271-283, and Hyatt, 1956, pp. 867-873.) R.K. Harrison and others believe that the sermon extends through 8:3, but they concede that there are interruptions such as 7:16-20 where the Lord instructs Jeremiah concerning his own prayers of intercession for the people. (Harrison, 1973, pp. 49-52.) All agree that the general arrangement in our text appears to be a collection of certain fragmented proclamations with some interruptions in the thoughts. The sermon does not contain poetry, but is entirely prose (from 7:2 through 8:3). The passage, 7:1—8:3 divides itself into the following five parts:

1. 7:1-15 The Temple Sermon
2. 7:16-20 The Cult of the Queen of Heaven
3. 7:21-28 Obedience vs. Ritual Sacrifices
4. 7:29-34 The Sins in the Valley of Hinnom, (the Valley of Slaughter)
5. 8:1-3 The Worship of the Astral Deities, the Host of Heaven

#### The Temple Sermon. 7:1-15

The message in 7:1-15 which Jeremiah delivered at “the gate of the Lord’s house” is a severe warning to the people of the coming disasters if they fail to return to God. There is a parallel but shorter version of the Temple Sermon in 26:1-9. In that passage the text says that it took place early in the reign of Jehoiakim which would place it shortly after 609 B.C. There can be little doubt that the sermon in chapter 26 is a shorter version of the sermon in 7:1—8:3.

The people had great superstitious confidence in the temple, considering it not only a sacred structure but also as a sanctuary of protection for their nation. Some of the people thought that the very existence of the temple meant security for the city of Jerusalem. Certainly the Lord would not allow his own temple and the sacred city to be destroyed. The moral and ethical obligations of the people were displaced by their preoccupation with the temple and religious rituals. This false and superstitious sense of security proved to be without foundation however when the armies of Nebuchadnezzar invaded and destroyed the city in 587 B.C.

These statements present an interesting picture of the religious life of the people. They still held on to the Lord but considered him to be just another god in the pantheon of polytheism. They continued the sacrifices and other religious observances of the Law, yet they adopted the practices of Baal worship as well. The Jerusalem temple was considered a very sacred site but only in a superstitious way. Their great sins were that they had turned to serve other gods, neglected the poor and orphans, had shed innocent blood, committed perjury and theft, and practiced sexual

immorality. Yet they turned to the temple and said, “The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord,” (7:4) and “We are safe,” (7:10). Thompson refers to this as the “temple theology” of the people (Thompson, 1980, p. 277) and Harrison calls it “the Jerusalem theology” (Harrison, 1973, p. 49). Theirs had become a sort of “cafeteria religion” where they could pick and choose what they liked out of a variety of religions without singular allegiance to any one of the gods, including the Lord. The eighth century prophets ran into the same problem, and gave the same answers. Jeremiah warned them that as God had destroyed Shiloh he would also destroy Jerusalem. “I called you but you did not answer.” 7:13.

In verses 5-6 he lists one general condition and four specific conditions of their remaining in the land. The general condition was that they must change their ways and actions. Specifically they were to deal justly with each other, refrain from unjust treatment of the poor the widows and the foreign residents in the land, they must not shed innocent blood. They must not turn to other gods. It should be noted that the moral and ethical corruption in Judah came primarily from their allegiance to other gods. Paganism placed little stress on moral and ethical values while the Law placed great emphasis on these. Verse 8 reminded them that they were placing their confidence in lies and deceptive words. These probably came from false prophets and priests.

Shiloh was a reminder of God’s destruction of his “house” or “place” when the people forsook him. The same thing would happen to Jerusalem if the people did not return to God. The destruction of Shiloh is not recorded in the Old Testament, but the stories of Eli, Samuel, and the Ark of the Covenant are found in I Sam. 1-4. In I Sam. 4:1-2 the Philistines defeated Israel at the battle of Aphek. Verses 10-11 speak of a second battle in which the Philistines captured the Ark. Although the Old Testament does not record a battle at Shiloh, archaeological excavations at Shiloh show that it was destroyed about 1050 B.C. which is also the time of the battle of Aphek. Therefore most archaeologists and Old Testament commentators have concluded that Shiloh was probably destroyed in the series of battles which Israel had with the Philistines at that time.

### **The Cult of the Queen of Heaven. 7:16-20**

This section actually constitutes an interruption in the material, but it also adds certain compatible content to the Jeremiah’s message. It is a personal instruction to Jeremiah from the Lord, in which Jeremiah is told not to pray for or intercede on behalf of the people of Judah. Even though the content of this passage fits into the general character of the Temple Sermon, some scholars believe it may have come from a different time period. This is based on the fact that it is an interruption of the thought as God gives instructions to Jeremiah.

We must admit that it is strange for the Lord to tell Jeremiah not to pray for or intercede on behalf of the people. Previously Moses had interceded on behalf of Israel when they worshipped the golden calf at Mt. Sinai and at the time of the discouraging report from the spies (Ex. 32:31-32, Num. 14:13-16). Perhaps this statement to Jeremiah is a strong emphasis from the Lord that the sins of the people are so deeply rooted that the possibility of repentance is very remote. This could have been intended to underscore that fact. Their sins had separated them from God and he said he would not listen. The particular sins of which Jeremiah is speaking involved their worship of the “Queen of Heaven.”

The prophet describes a homey scene in order to portray the depth of paganism which had permeated God's people. In the scene there are children gathering wood, the father lighting the fire, and the mother doing the cooking as she prepares to bake cakes. The family is totally involved. But what is the purpose of this family cooperation? They are baking cakes in honor of the "Queen of Heaven." Scholars differ concerning the identity of this goddess. In some Ugaritic texts Anat, the Canaanite goddess of fertility is referred to as "queen of the high heavens." Another Canaanite goddess, Ashtaroth, is also considered by some to be this deity. She was supposedly the daughter of "Ouranos," a word meaning "heaven."

The word for "cakes" is from an Akkadian word meaning "sweet-cakes." The city of Akkad is thought to have been located in Chaldea a few miles east of Babylon. This has caused many commentators to conclude that the deity of which the Lord is speaking is Astarte (Ishtar) a goddess of the Assyrians and Babylonians. She was one of the most important goddesses in the Assyro-Babylonian pantheon and very popular during this period. She was their goddess of fertility, and many bizarre sexual rituals and practices were carried on in her name. She was worshipped by women in the home and the cakes which were baked in her honor were often made in the form of a woman, the stars, the moon, or a crescent, all of which were her symbols. Men were grossly involved in the worship of this goddess performing various sexual acts in her name. Josiah's reforms were aimed, in part, at destroying this but the privacy of home life could have made it very difficult. The famous main gate to the city of Babylon was the Ishtar Gate named in her honor. Not only were God's people bringing dishonor on the Lord and provoking him to anger, but they were also dishonoring and shaming themselves. In verse 20 the Lord expresses his anger at the people for their evil acts and pagan worship.

### **Obedience vs. Ritual Sacrifices. 7:21-28**

The people had placed a great deal of confidence in the temple but it had simply become a cover for the immoral unethical lives they were living from day to day. In a contemporary setting we might picture these people saying, "We go to church every Sunday. Therefore the Lord will protect us from all enemies." In this block Jeremiah will show how the people thought that observing the ritual could really be a substitute for righteous living, even if the sacrifices were not according to the specifics of the Law. He uses a little sarcasm to get his point across. "Go ahead! Offer the burnt offering as you would all your other sacrifices, including the burnt offering."

Verse 21 presents a problem which has caused a considerable amount of disagreement among scholars. Almost all English versions translate the verse showing God saying, "When I brought your fathers out of Egypt I did not speak to them or command them concerning sacrifices." Some scholars such as J. Philip Hyatt take the position that the moral requirements of the Law of Moses were "the primary demands of God" but the sacrifices were "man-made and were not willed" by the Lord. (Hyatt, 1956, p 875.) These commentators believe that the sacrificial system was developed much later by the priests and that it evolved over the course of many years. To back this up they call attention to the fact that during the wilderness wanderings nothing is said about the people offering sacrifices.

Admittedly there is a problem here which needs to be confronted. We must first see that Jeremiah is emphasizing that at the time of the exodus and arrival at Mt. Sinai God's fundamental

commandment was that the people obey him. “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites” (Ex. 19:5-6). Jeremiah is emphasizing the basic condition of obedience to all that God told Moses. Hyatt’s interpretation does not take into account two important possibilities. First, the people had divorced all moral-ethical behavior from the sacrificial offerings, and Jeremiah could very well have been emphasizing the fact that God did not make such a division. Obedience involves moral-ethical conformity as well as ritual conformity. He could have pictured God as saying, “You are offering sacrifices as if they had nothing to do with holy living and morality. I never commanded anything like that or spoke of such a separation. The sacrifices and moral behavior are parts of the same package.” Many Old Testament prophets and others called attention to this. See I Sam. 15:20-23, Ps. 51:1-17, Is. 1:10-20, Hos. 6:1-6 (quoted by Jesus in Matt. 9:9-13 and Matt. 12:1-7), Am., 4:4-5, Am. 5:21-25, Mic. 6:1-8.

The other alternative which Hyatt does not consider is that Jeremiah might have been sarcastically mocking the people as if to say, “Go ahead! You are acting like there is no law of ethical-moral behavior, why don’t you also ignore the sacrifices as if I never said anything about them either.” Thompson says, “The preexilic prophets, like Jeremiah denounced a perverted kind of worship in which the liturgy had ceased to give the covenantal setting of worship its proper place.” (Thompson, 1980, p. 290.) All of this was a gross perversion of the meaning and interdependence of the godly life, the covenant, and the worship as it related to the sacrifices.

In verse 21 he speaks of the flesh of the burnt offering being eaten by the offerer instead of being completely burned. In some of the sacrifices there were provisions for the one making the offering to eat portions of the meat. In other offerings some of the meat was given to the officiating priest, and in others offerings such as the fellowship offering the meat could be used for a feast among friends, etc. (See Lev. 3, 7, 22, 27, 7:11-18, etc.) However, with the burnt offering none of the meat was to be eaten but it was all to be burned. (See Lev. 1.) The burnt offering was offered daily in the morning and in the evening, doubled on the Sabbath, and offered on special occasions as specified in the Law. The requirement of the Law was that this offering was completely the Lord’s, but they were taking part of the meat for themselves. God had given these commandments to be obeyed as a condition of his continued relationship with the nation. Verse 21 also shows that the people had polluted the offerings commanded in the Law by mixing pagan practices with their sacrifices.

The problem which God saw in Judah was, “But they did not listen or pay attention; instead, they followed the stubborn inclinations of their evil hearts. They went backward and not forward” (7:24). Obedience to the Lord was of paramount importance, but the people refused to listen to his messages. Consequently God said he would not listen to them. It is interesting to notice how often the idea of not listening is mentioned. The phrase occurs about thirty-three times in the book. Twenty of these refer to the fact that the people would not listen to the Lord. Seven times God says he will not listen to them because of their wickedness. Six times the word is used in a warning to the people concerning false prophets and deceitful words or other kinds of warnings. Jeremiah was told that the people would not listen to him (7:27).

## **The Sins in the Valley of Hinnom, (the Valley of Slaughter). 7:29-34**

The Valley of Hinnom (Ben Hinnom), located on the south and western sides of Jerusalem, was the site of the sacrifice of children to the pagan god Molech. Archaeological discoveries have shown that child sacrifice was practiced among a number of ancient nations of the Middle East. In the ruins of the North African city of Carthage archeologists have shown remains of hundreds of children who died in such sacrifices to the goddess Tanit and Baal-Hammon. It appears that the practice was introduced by the Phoenicians, Israel's neighbors who were such passionate worshippers of Baal. The Biblical historical records show that the practice began among the Israelites in the days of Solomon through the influence of his many foreign wives (I Kgs. 11:5-8).

Later in Israel's history two kings of Judah, Ahaz and Manasseh, practiced this type of human sacrifice. See II Kings 16:3, II Chron. 28:3, and II Kgs. 21:1-6, II Chron. 33:6. The practice was referred to as causing one's "sons to pass through the fire, according to the abominations of the nations." A syncretistic form of worship evolved. It consisted of a perverted form of worship of the Lord combined with child sacrifices to Molech all of which produced an especially abhorrent distortion of the Mt. Sinai covenant. The Valley of Hinnom where these sacrifices took place became a garbage dump, and was referred to in the New Testament as "Gehenna" or "hell." Although the practice of human sacrifice was abolished during the reforms of Josiah it had been revived by the time of Jeremiah (Jer. 7:31). This may have taken place late in the reign of Jehoiakim during the final days before the destruction of Jerusalem. Ezek. 20:25-26 may be speaking of this, but it is not completely clear.

There are some differences among scholars concerning Milcom and Molech. Some believe that these are two names for the same god and others believe that Molech was a god closely related to the worship of the Phoenician Baals, while Milcom was "the detestable god of the Ammonites" (I Kgs. 11:5). In the valley of Hinnom was a place called Topheth which means the "fireplace." Hebrew linguists say that with a slight change in the pointing of the word it can mean "shameful."

Although the first born among the animals and humans belonged to the Lord, provisions were made under the Law for humans and large animals to be redeemed. See Ex. 13:2, 22:29-30, 34:19-20, Num. 3:13, 8:17-19. The Old Testament is not clear concerning just how the first born male humans were to be redeemed but a statement in Num. 8:17-19 says, "I have taken the Levites in place of all of the firstborn sons in Israel." In Jer. 7:31 the Lord specifically says he did not intend that his claim on the firstborn male humans meant a human sacrifice.

Craigie, *et al.* have a pertinent comment on this entire passage:

And if we are horrified by the thought of child-sacrifice in the Valley of Hinnom, we need to ask whether it is so fundamentally different, in the taking of young life, from some of the casual forms of abortion that characterize many sectors of modern society. The point is that many ordinary citizens, in any age, easily succumb to the accepted standards and mores of their time; the prophet is that rare species in the human race who can see through society's veneer, its rationalizations and convenient explanations, and expose the sickness and corruption within.



(Craigie, *et al.*, 1991, on CD.)

In view of the great tragedy which would befall Jerusalem and its inhabitants in the near future, Jeremiah says that the Valley of Hinnom would become known as the Valley of Slaughter because the whole place would be filled with the corpses of the defeated and slaughtered people of Judah. They would become food for the birds of prey. So complete would this slaughter be that there would be no one around to scare the birds away.

### **The Worship of the Astral Deities, the Host of Heaven. 8:1-3**

The worship of astral deities, the host of heaven, was taking place during the reign of Manasseh, but many scholars believe that it had its roots in Israel much earlier than that. Jeremiah's description of the desecration of the dead bodies of God's people is extreme and vivid. The people had worshipped the host of heaven, and now the bones of kings, priests, prophets and ordinary people would be exposed to the sun, moon, and stars which they had worshipped. The prophet describes this as an act of great mockery, ridicule, and disdain against those so-called astral gods. There will be no one to gather up the bones and bury them, but they would be like garbage. Linguists say that the modern day equivalent of "garbage" would be "fertilizer." In 8:3 he says, "All the survivors of this evil nation will prefer death to life, declares the Lord Almighty." For the ancient Hebrews the unburied body of a dead person was considered to be accursed and to leave the deceased exposed to the elements was the height of horror, disrespect, and contempt. In 8:3 the Lord shows that the fate of Judah would be so severe that death, even with such terrible desecration, was to be preferred to life.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Sin and Consequences – God and Idols**

#### **8:4—10:25**

#### **Introduction**

This block of text seems to be a collection of miscellaneous items pertaining to sin and its consequences rather than an orderly development of a theme thus making it difficult at times to know who is speaking. Jeremiah moves from topic to topic, listing various sins of the people but he does not develop any one of those topics very fully. One of his literary devices is to ask questions then answer them. Sometimes however, the Lord answers. At times the people seem to be speaking of the coming tragedy, perhaps facing the reality of their own doom. It may be that they have suddenly come face to face with the reality of their own sins and this is a cry to the Lord in desperation, but it is too late. On the other hand it is possible that these passages are Jeremiah's own soliloquy, a sort of personal utterance disclosing the thoughts of his heart. His roots in the nation's identity are so deep and his compassion is so full that he suffers terribly with them. These are his deepest thought about his nation's devastation.

Here are a few examples of the alternation of speakers. In 8:4-13 the Lord speaks. In 8:14-16 the people are terrified at what is about to happen as the invaders advance. Jeremiah meditates on this, and speaks of the tragedy awaiting "the daughter of my people." The Lord speaks briefly in 8:17. In 8:18—9:2 the prophet begins his soliloquy. Once again the Lord inserts his statement in 9:3, and in 9:4-6 the Lord instructs Jeremiah about the kind of people in whose midst he is living. In 9:7-11 the Lord speaks again of the terrible destruction which will come on Jerusalem. In 9:12-16 the style of writing changes to prose and the Lord gives some explanations. The poetry continues in 9:17.

#### **Sin and complacency. 8:4-13**

This block divides itself into three smaller blocks, (4-7, 8-9, and 10-12) but each contributes to the basic idea of sin and the complacency of the people. In 8:4-7 Jeremiah begins with a rhetorical question about a man falling or turning away: "When men fall down, do they not get up? When a man turns away, does he not return?" The obvious answer is "Yes," but for Judah there is no interest in returning or "getting up." Sin and consequences are evident but the complacency of the people blinds them to this fact. The people are acting in an irrational way. They are satisfied with things just as they are right now. This behavior is incomprehensible to the prophet. Sin has a way of searing one's conscious and making an individual insensible to sin's penalties. Those individuals cling to the deceitful words of a false prophet or anyone who will say what they want to hear. Jeremiah has listened to them attentively but he has not picked up anything which makes good sense or indicates the slightest repentance. The people are like horses running into a battle without the slightest thought of the dangers they face. Judah is doing this deliberately. It is not just a gradual slipping away from the Lord through neglect or inattention. Even the birds follow the natural course of things knowing when they are supposed to migrate, and they order their lives to do what is necessary. Judah however pays no attention to the dangers of their own situation.

Verses 8-9, similar to 4-7, begin with a rhetorical question: “How can you say ‘We are wise, for we have the Law of the Lord,’ when actually the lying pen of the scribes has handled it falsely?” The fact was that the people had refused to obey the Law. Their reasoning and behavior made no sense. The scribes write falsely and the people accept it as truth. We should remember that copies of the Law of the Lord would have been primarily, perhaps entirely, in the hands of the priests. The cost of copying books made it almost prohibitive for individuals to own copies of the Law.

This is thought by some scholars to be the first mention in the Old Testament of scribes as a sort of special class of “professional” men. There were active scribes from much earlier times such as the “clans of scribes” mentioned in I Chron. 2:55 but we know nothing of their activities. Jeremiah appears to have gone beyond this toward a little more professional class of scribes. We do not know exactly when the oracles in 8:4-12 were written, but they could have come during the reign of Josiah about the time that the Book of the Law was discovered in the temple, II Kgs. 22:8-13. During the days of Josiah’s reforms there appears to have been progress toward recognizing some scribes as a “professional” class (II Chron. 34:13). Through the years the scribes became the semi-official interpreters of the law. When the Jews returned from the Exile under Nehemiah, Ezra is designated as a scribe and priest. Some of the Levites appear to have been recognized as professionals in dispensing information on the Law and teaching the people its meaning. See Neh. 8:1-13.

Verses 10-12 state, “From the least to the greatest, all are greedy for gain; prophets and priests alike all practice deceit.” Jeremiah emphasizes the fact that this was a national systemic problem. Notice that the word “prophet” is used rather freely, sometimes referring to prophets of the Lord but also speaking of the false or self-proclaimed prophets. The word properly refers to those who publicize a message which was thought by the prophet and/or others to be very insightful. The proclaimer may or may not have asserted the divine origin of his message. It may have been based on the proclaimer’s own observation and interpretation of the conditions of the day and what he believed those conditions would lead to in the future. This is in contrast to the prophets of the Lord who had a divine message for the people. It appears that many people had difficulty in telling the difference between the false and true prophets. Instead of seeing the severity of their spiritual illness they treated it as if it were trivial or unimportant. Some of these “prophets” assure the people of peace, but there is no peace on the horizon. They had no shame in their greed and false assurances. They were not embarrassed enough to blush as they lied about the spiritual illness of God’s people. Consequently they will be brought down. In verse 13 Jeremiah returns to his simile of the vine as in 2:21, 5:10 and 6:9. God planted a choice vine (2:21) but when the time of harvest finally came there were no grapes or figs to gather. Only withered leaves, fruitless vines, and barren branches were there. The farm which had so much promise and potential proved to be unproductive and produced nothing.

### **A taste if reality. 8:14-17**

In 14-16 Jeremiah either speaks this himself, as he feels such a dynamic connection to his people or he may be picturing the people of Judah facing themselves in desperation and asking, “Why are we sitting here? Gather together! Let us flee to the fortified cities and perish there!” They recognize the fact that the Lord God has predicted doom for them because of their sins. The

peace of which they had been assured, and the healing for which they had hoped have all failed, and now they hear the snorting of horses of war coming from Dan (the direction of the foe from the north). The mission of those invaders is to devour Judah.

The tribe and city of Dan lay to the far north. The route which would be taken by a conquering foe coming down from the north would lead straight through Dan. This is the modern day Golan Heights on the border between Israel and Syria. Verse 17 has the words of the Lord as he affirms his resolve to punish Judah. He will send venomous snakes into their midst – snakes which cannot be charmed.

### **Jeremiah's lamentation – confession. 8:18—9:2**

In 8:18—9:2 we have the weeping prophet expressing his sorrow as he hears the cry of his people. Scholars are divided as to whether this is a prophetic statement of the coming disaster or the expression of the prophet's feelings as he actually witnesses the tragedy of which he had previously warned. Its meaning is not affected by either interpretation. The form and expression of this block is much like the prophet's confession in 4:19-22. Amos, Ezekiel, Isaiah and other prophets shared deeply and emotionally in the tragedies they foresaw for their nation. Stanley R. Hooper refers to this as one of the Old Testament's most moving elegies – an eloquent mournful poem. (Hooper, 1956, p. 886.) Jeremiah sees himself so intensely involved in the life of his people that he suffers their fate with them, but in addition he feels the weight of their sins against the Lord.

Most versions translate the beginning of verse 18 in much the same way as the ASV shows it: "O that I could comfort myself against sorrow! My heart is faint within me." On the other hand the NIV translates it as if it were Jeremiah's appeal to God, speaking of him as "my Comforter." We have the mournful and desperate questions, "Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her king no longer there?" (vs19). The people are without religious leadership or political-military strength. Of course the answer is that the Lord is in Zion and the king is in Jerusalem but the spiritual departure of the people is so severe that neither the Lord nor the king offers relief to them.

It is difficult to know exactly who is speaking in verses 20-22 because the verses make sense under a number of different circumstances. Perhaps the prophet himself is crying out in great sorrow as he sees himself so closely attached to the dying nation. He feels that he is part of their disaster and he mournfully exclaims, "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved." The last chance for Judah is irretrievably past and time cannot be reversed to give them another opportunity to repent. Although he was not a part of their apostasy, he cannot divorce himself from the roots which bind him to his brothers in Judah. In verse 21 the prophet expresses his own grief.

Some commentators believe that those speaking are the condemned people who have now realize their desperate situation as in 8:14-16. When this reality comes to life they cry out in alarm; "The harvest is passed, the summer is ended, and we are not saved" (vss. 20-21). As they continue to see the grim face of reality they ask, "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?" (vs.22). Is there no hope for us at all? Are we irrevocably doomed? The unfortunate answer is obvious. The balm of Gilead and the healing skills of the physicians are no longer ef-

fective or available. Hope has gone, and the time for the Lord's punishment of his people has come.

Jeremiah's symbolism is contrary to fact because there was still balm in Gilead and the physicians were still there, but the hopelessness of the situation was the reality which he saw. Gilead had been the supplier of medication for the nation. There was a resinous gum from trees which was used as an ointment for wounds. Judah however is beyond help. There is no salve which will heal her wounds. In this scenario verse 21 becomes the prophet's interruption to express his own grief at the terrible situation of his dying nation. Whoever is speaking, whether the people or Jeremiah, the passage reflects the mournful cry of those who are hopelessly lost.

In 9:1-2 the prophet speaks of another "contrary to fact" situation as he mourns the fate of his countrymen. "Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears!" His grief for the Daughter of Zion is almost indescribable. His weeping over Judah is similar to Jesus' expression of sorrow and weeping over the city of Jerusalem in Lk. 19:41-44: "As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, 'If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace — but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you.'"

From his weeping over the fate of his countrymen Jeremiah expresses his wish to be completely removed from witnessing the tragedy. He wishes he were in a wilderness, a lodging place for travelers, away from the adulterers and crowds of the unfaithful rather than seeing the demise of his nation.

### **The sorrow of God and Jerusalem's ruin. 9:3-16**

In 9:3-11 the poetic form continues as the prophet delivers the message of the Lord. In speaking of the adulterers and unfaithful of verse 2 Jeremiah says their tongue is ready as a drawn bow to speak lies instead of truth. Lies may have given them triumph in the land, but that is coming to an end. Within their ranks there is no trust. Brother lies to brother and a man cannot trust his own friends. They weary themselves with much evil and live in a world of deception. Yet, they don't acknowledge the Lord. Verses 7-11 give a vivid description of God's wrath against his people because there is no truth among them. God asks the question, "Should I not punish them for this?" It is heartbreaking to the Lord to have to bring this sort of punishment on his people, but justice demands it when the people have refused to repent. God will weep and express his lament because the land which was once flowing with milk and honey has been desecrated by the very people to whom it was given. The holy city will therefore become a heap of rubble, and the jackals will live there. The towns of Judah will no longer be habitable.

Verses 12-16 break away from the poetic style and we have prose once again. In narrative form Jeremiah delivers God's message concerning the sins of the people explaining why the land is to become desolate. The stubbornness of the people, their obsession with sin, their insatiable desire

to follow the immorality of paganism, and their worship of the Baals had resulted in the degradation and destruction of their nation and the ultimate captivity of Judah.

Why was the Lord set on destroying the nation? At the root of all of this was the fact that the people had forsaken the law of the Lord, 9:13. This goes back to the pledge made by their forefathers in Ex. 19:4-8 when Moses came down from the mountain with God's offer of a covenant. The breaking of the covenant is evident in Jeremiah. Instead of following the Law and covenant they followed the inclinations of their own stubborn hearts and the worship of the Baals.

Judah had consistently refused the Lord's offer of forgiveness. They believed that the price of repentance was too great for them and they continued in their evil. Consequently the Lord said, "See, I will make this people eat bitter food and drink poisoned water. I will scatter them among nations that neither they nor their fathers have known, and I will pursue them with the sword until I have destroyed them." (Jer. 9:15-16).

See Appendix "A" for information on the discovery of the Ugaritic Texts and Baal worship.

### **A funeral dirge over Jerusalem. 9:17-26**

At verse 17 the text returns to poetic style and the prophet introduces a saying from the Lord. The time has come when the professional wailing women are to be called in to mourn over the death of Judah. These wailers or mourners were women who were hired by the family of a deceased person to come in and utter high pitched shrieks. This was an ancient custom in the Middle East and it is still practiced in some culture in that area. Jeremiah tells them to come quickly, calling attention to the urgency of the occasion. These sounds would be heard throughout Zion and the tears would flow like water from their eyes. The atmosphere was charged with the reality of the shame of the nation and the ruins of the city which was once so proud.

Not only would the mourners wail over the death of Jerusalem and its inhabitants, but they would tell it to their children and teach them to wail. Verse 21 speaks of death climbing in through the windows and entering the fortress. Since Judah had avidly worshipped Baal, Jeremiah may be chiding them with the pagan myth of Baal, Yamm, and Mot.

The myth tells of a battle between Baal and Yamm in which Baal was victorious. Baal then decided to build a massive and lavish palace. The architect proposed that a window be placed in the palace but Baal did not want it. The architect prevailed and the window was included. To Baal's dismay Mot, the god of death, infertility, and the underworld climbed in through the window. Baal and Mot fought, and Baal won forcing both Yamm and Mot to acknowledge Baal as "king." However, Mot became the enemy of Baal, leading to their annual battle in which Mot killed Baal but later he arose from the dead. On the other hand, Jeremiah may simply be using this as a figure of speech, particularly since this is poetic. The text of this myth was found in the Ras Shamrah Tablets. Go to <http://pages.uoregon.edu/dfalk/courses/bible/myth.htm> for more information and to read the text itself.

As Jeremiah describes the ruin of Jerusalem he speaks of the dead bodies of Judah's warriors lying like garbage in a field or like sheaves of grain left by the harvesters. There was no one left to bury the dead. To the Israelites this was the greatest possible sacrilege and disrespect for the

dead. With all of this devastation, the wise man is not to boast about his wisdom or the strong man about his strength, or the rich man about his wealth. “But let him who boasts boast about this; that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who exercises kindness, justice, and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight declares the Lord” (9:24).

In verses 25-26 Jeremiah speaks of those who are circumcised only in the flesh. Circumcision did not begin with Abraham, but it was practiced among a good many nations of the Middle East even before that time. However when God spoke to Abraham about it the practice took on a different meaning. It was a sign, in the flesh, of God’s covenant with Abraham and his descendants. Jeremiah’s comparison is similar to Paul’s use of the same figure of speech concerning circumcision, not in the flesh but in the heart. See Rom. 2:28-29.

### **God and idols. 10:1-16**

Manuscript problems with this block have created some translation problems, but linguists agree that the meaning of the passage is clear. Because of the vocabulary, style, and organization of this passage many commentators believe that its authorship may be an open question. The style is quite different from portions of the book which are generally accepted as authentic, and the author jumps around in his treatment of the subject matter. Thompson and others believe that such criticism does not take into account the fact that ancient Hebrew writers frequently went from one line of thought to another, and their mental logic was not the same as that of twenty-first century western thought. On the other hand, Hyatt, Bright, and others claim that the “vast majority of scholars” hold the position that this section is from a different author, and was probably written during the exile while the people were not in Palestine but were in another country. Since it is not the purpose of our own study to explore these types of critical problems, we refer the student to other sources for that information. Thompson appears to be characteristic of those who hold that Jeremiah is the author and Hyatt characterizes the opposite viewpoint. See Thompson, 1980, pp. 323-326, and Hyatt, 1956, p. 897.

In 10:2 the prophet gives the Lord’s first warning to other people concerning idolatry. A literal translation warns them against becoming “disciples” of the nations which surround Judah. Ancient Middle Eastern religions gave a great deal of attention to astral phenomena – the sun, the moon, and the stars – considering them to be symbols of the gods. Israel was warned about this in Deut. 4:19 and 17:3 and the fall of the northern Kingdom of Israel was attributed in part to the fact that they bowed down to the “starry hosts,” II Kgs. 17:6. Manasseh built altars to the “starry host,” II Kgs. 21:3. The reforms of Josiah attempted to destroy these practices, II Kgs. 23:4-5. Amos, a century before Jeremiah, warned against these practices, Am. 5:26.

Verses 3-5 give a vivid description of some of the foolishness of idol worship. Idols are created by workmen who cut down trees in the forest and craftsmen who shape them. The silversmiths and goldsmiths adorn them and these idols are held together with nails, lest they fall apart. But just like a scarecrow in a cucumber patch they cannot walk or talk, and must be propped up in place. They are not to be feared because they cannot harm anyone, but neither can they do good to anyone. Isaiah speaks of the same thing using similar language (Is. 40:18-20, 41:7, 44:9-20, and 46:5-7). In the study of argumentation and debate this type of polemic is referred to as *ar-*

*gumentum ad absurdum*. That is where one party in the debate shows how an opposing argument is completely absurd and ridiculous because it is totally out of touch with logic and reality.

Verses 6-16 continue the rather sarcastic mood of this block by comparing the powerless idols with the powerful creator Lord. The prophet begins by speaking of the greatness of the Lord. There is no one like the Lord. He is great and his name is mighty in power. Among the ancient people the name, particularly the name of a god, was of utmost importance. Anyone who could call the name of his god carried great weight with the god. The God of Israel also emphasized this. In Gen. 4:26 “men began to call on the name of the Lord.” It is mentioned very early and frequently in Hebrew history as in Gen. 12:8, 13:4, 21:33, 32:27-29, Ex. 13:3, 20:7, etc. With the pagans this was a superstitious magical use. Among the Israelites it was supposed to be a mark of deepest respect, honor, and awe.

Verses 6-7 begin to give comparisons between the Lord and the idols. The idols are described as senseless and foolish. They are the work of men’s hands being made from physical materials shipped in from Tarshish (generally thought to have been Spain) and Uphaz (an unknown place). The Syriac version has the name Ophir at this point, and has caused some scholars to conclude that Uphaz was, in fact, Ophir. We know that Ophir had rich deposits of gold because Solomon and others brought gold to Canaan from Ophir (I Kgs. 9:28, 10:11, 22:48, Job 22:24, Ps. 45:9), but its location is not known. Some geographers believe it might have been located on the extreme southeast shore of the Red Sea but this is admittedly uncertain. The idols have no life, they can’t speak or teach, they are manmade, and they are dressed up by men in clothing made by human hands.

By contrast, verses 10-16 describe the Lord. He is the living and true God, he speaks to his people and teaches them. He created heaven and earth by his own power. When he is angry the earth trembles and the nations cannot endure his wrath. He did all of this by his wisdom. He controls the weather, the thunder, the rain, and the wind.

In Jeremiah’s comparison of idols with the Lord he covers many of the basic areas in which the ancient pagans claimed to have a “god in charge.” This is particularly evident in reference to Baal (god of storms and weather) and Hadad (the Syrian god of storms and weather). Baal was one of the gods which was especially attractive to the Israelites. Verse 16 is a strong affirmation that the Lord is not like the gods of paganism, but he is the creator of all things. Jeremiah’s statements therefore are clearly seen as an attack against Baal, the god of the weather, storms, thunder, and rain.

### **The impending doom of Judah. 10:17-25**

Jeremiah returns to his description of the fate of Judah. There is an alternation of speakers in this block. At times the prophet is giving a message from the Lord (17-18), but at other times (19-21) he is seen so closely tied to the suffering of his people that he speaks on their behalf and expresses the grief of his own heart as if it were the grief of the people. He symbolizes the demise of Judah as one would view the terminal illness of a loved one. The wounds of Judah are incurable and the people must endure their sickness. Their dwellings (tents) are destroyed and their supporting structures (ropes) have been cut. Their sons have gone away so they can’t help repair



things. The symbolism is that of nomads wandering alone in the desert where there is no one to help them. The shepherds mentioned in verse 21 probably refer to the political or religious leaders of the nation, and they are deemed senseless because they do not inquire of the Lord.

In verse 22 either the Lord or Jeremiah express alarm at the noise and commotion heard coming from the North. This is probably referring to the onslaught of the Babylonians. Some commentators believe that this section actually originated during the Babylonian invasion of Judah in 587 B.C. when Jerusalem finally fell. On the other hand, it could be Jeremiah's description of what is in store for Judah in the very near future. When Nebuchadnezzar invaded Judah he not only destroyed Jerusalem but he lay waste many of the cities and towns of Judah. Archaeologists have confirmed this fact with many excavations showing the sixth century destruction of towns and villages, many of which were never occupied again. A few critical scholars have discounted much of this description. However, W.F. Albright, Biblical archaeologist of Johns Hopkins University and former director of the American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem, has led many excavations of this area and has made this interesting comment on the destruction of the towns of Judah.

Many towns were destroyed at the beginning of the sixth century B.C. and never again occupied; others were destroyed at that time and partly reoccupied at some later date; still others were destroyed and reoccupied after a long period of abandonment, marked by a sharp change of stratum and by intervening indications of use for non-urban purposes. There is not a single known case where a town of Judah proper was continuously occupied through the exilic period.

(Albright, 1960, pp. 141-142.)

The final verses of this block constitute Jeremiah's prayer. He first acknowledges that the way of man is not within himself, and man is not equipped to direct his own footsteps. Jeremiah prays for justice to be done to those nations who do not know the Lord, and have opposed Judah.

## Chapter V

### Warnings and Judgment to Come

#### 11:1—15:4

### Introduction

We do not know exactly when this sermon might have taken place. Some commentators believe it was delivered during the reign of Jehoiakim not too long before the Exile while others believe it was probably given shortly after the discovery of the book of the Law during the reign of Josiah. R.K. Harrison in the Tyndale Commentaries says that most commentators now believe that it came during the reign of Josiah (Harrison, 1973, on CD.) Thompson and Bright however are notable exceptions to this (Thompson, 1980, pp. 341-343, Bright, 1965, p. 89). It is also important that we keep in mind that this block may very well have been a collection of oracles delivered at different times.

In addition, commentators are divided concerning the identity of the covenant(s) being discussed. Some believe that there are two covenants being considered – the ancient covenant the Lord made with Israel at Mt. Sinai (Ex. 19-20) and the covenant described as the “Book of the Law” found in the temple, *i.e.* much of the book of Deuteronomy. Many scholars consider these different covenants. See II Kgs. 22:1-10 and 23:1-3. Bright, Thompson, along with Craigie, *et al.* all say that perhaps too much emphasis has been placed on the differences between these two when actually there is no reason to conclude that two different covenants are in the mind of Jeremiah or the writer of the book of II Kings. (Bright, 1965, pp. 88-89, Thompson, 1980, pp. 341-343, Craigie, *et al.*, 1991, on CD.) For our purposes, we consider the covenant to be that which was given to Moses at Mt. Sinai which is reflected in the book of the Law.

Commentators also divide this block (11:1—13:27) differently. Thompson treats the block as a whole, but he divided it into nine relatively short sections. They are: “The Broken Covenant” (11:1-17), “The Plot Against Jeremiah” (11:18—12:6), “The Lord’s Lament Over his Lost Inheritance” (12:7-13), “Death or Life to Israel’s Neighbors” (12:14-17), “The Symbolic Linen Belt” (13:1-11), “The Parable of the Wineskins” (13:12-14), “A Plea and Final Warning” (13:15-17), “Lament Over the King and the Queen Mother” (13:18-19), Jerusalem’s Incurable Sickness and Punishment” (13:20-27). (Thompson, 1980, pp. 339-375). Bright rearranges some of the sections of this block attempting to give a greater sense of unity in reference to form, structure, and content (Bright, 1965, pp. 81-96). On the other hand, Craigie, *et al.* divide the entire block into four parts: “Jeremiah and the Covenant” (11:1—17), “Jeremiah and the Men of Anathoth” 11:18—12:6, “The Sorrow of God” (12:7—17), and “Symbolism and Sin” (13:1—27) (Craigie, *et al.*, 1991, on CD). Admittedly the book is a collection of topics and forms, and even a casual reading will show that it does not give its readers either a chronological or a united topical presentation. It is difficult to find a sense of unity of content in the book in general, and this passage in particular. Perhaps this is explained in part by the fact that the original writing of Jeremiah was destroyed by King Jehoiakim (Jer. 36) and it was later rewritten.

### **The broken covenant. 11:1-17**

Jeremiah, much like Hosea, says a great deal about the covenant although they treat its violations in different ways. Hosea compares violations in the light of the marriage covenant but Jeremiah does not present his material in that fashion. The general character of 11:1-17 makes us think of the reforms of Josiah and the part Jeremiah might have played in those reforms. Some commentators go back to 8:8-12 believing that Jeremiah was taking part in the reforms but became disillusioned at the superficiality of the response of the people. It seems however that there is not enough evidence in 8:8-12 to warrant this conclusion. On the other hand, in our present passage there is evidence that Jeremiah was instructed to travel throughout Jerusalem and to some of the towns of Judah warning the people of their violations of the covenant, 11:1-8. Various commentators however believe that this places too much emphasis on the phrase “in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem.” Rather, it is considered a figure of speech instead of a direction. Bright and others who hold to this position emphasize that Jeremiah’s ministry is really confined to Jerusalem, particularly to the temple until he was expelled in 36:5. This expression used in Jeremiah is thought to describe his general work, not that he became a sort of itinerant prophet. Without doubt the covenant at Mt. Sinai is what he is addressing at this time. Much of what Jeremiah says in this sermon can also be found in the book of Deuteronomy. This has caused many scholars to believe that Jeremiah is basically restating that material and that he did not receive it as a true oracle from God. The blessings and curses pronounced with regard to obedience and disobedience of the covenant are quite similar in character to Deut. 27:15-26 and in Deut. 28:1-68. It seems however that these scholars place too much emphasis on sources rather than on content. Certainly we cannot avoid the reality of the influence of Deuteronomy but Jeremiah is claiming that the Lord has spoken to him.

In 11:1-4 Jeremiah attaches these blessings and curses clearly to the stipulations of the covenant given to Israel at the time of the exodus. He was commissioned to proclaim this throughout Judah and on the streets of Jerusalem. The terms and stipulations of the Sinai covenant would probably have been quite new to many of the people to whom Jeremiah delivered his message. We need to remember that about six hundred thirty years had passed since the giving of the Sinai covenant. (This considers the exodus to have taken place about 1250 B.C. and the time of Jeremiah’s oracle was roughly 620 B.C.) The long standing idolatrous practices and general apostasy of Israel and Judah had certainly resulted in almost total ignorance of the covenant and its requirements. The people of Judah and Jerusalem may very well then have considered the proclamations of Jeremiah to be without foundation or authority. The Lord had become to them just one more god in the pagan pantheon. Jeremiah’s response to the Lord’s message was “Amen!”

It is interesting that Jeremiah mentions the covenant twenty-five times in the book, and five of these are in this short passage (vss. 2, 3, 6, 8, and 10). Investigation will show that in Exodus and Deuteronomy there are numerous mentions of the blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. In the ancient world the ideas of blessings for conformity to a covenant and penalties for nonconformity were common, and covenants or treaties between nations or between any superior and an inferior characteristically contained these types of conditions.

Examples of some ancient covenant forms were brought to light with the archaeological excavations at Boghazkoy (Turkey). These were covenants and treaties between the Hittite Empire and

various other nations. Some of these are of the type spoken of in Jeremiah 11:1-4. The excavations at **Boghazkoy** (Turkey) were conducted by Charles Texier and others in 1882 and in the twentieth century by Kurt Bittler and a company of German archaeologists. One of these discoveries was especially notable although it was not of the type in 11:1-4. It was an ancient Peace Treaty between the Hittite king Hattusilis II (1275-1250 B.C.) and the Egyptian king Ramses II (1301-1213 B.C.) who was the Pharaoh during the time of Moses and the exodus. This is the oldest peace treaty known to exist.

**Boghazkoy** was the capital and one of the most important cities of the ancient Hittite Empire. Contrary to earlier thought, the Hittite holdings were very extensive. They occupied much of Palestine, parts of Syria, and almost all of Egypt. They have been identified with the Hyksos who were the Pharaohs of Egypt from c. 1630 B.C. until their expulsion in c. 1520 B.C. This means that these foreign Hyksos were the rulers of Egypt at the time that Jacob's family moved there. Prior to the discoveries at Boghazkoy **nothing was known of the Hittites except a few references in the Bible which give no information concerning the extent of their Empire**. Discoveries made in ancient Assyria made reference to the "people of Hatti," who were later found to be the Hittites. The discoveries at Boghazkoy have given extensive information on the history of these people.

11:6-13 continue this thought, once again reminding the people that these obligations go back to the time of the exodus. Unfortunately their forefathers disregarded those warnings and paid no attention to the Lord just as the present generation was doing. Therefore the curses of which the Lord warned had come on their forefathers, and now would come to the people of Jeremiah's own generation.

Verse 9 speaks of a conspiracy among the people. The term "conspiracy" is usually used in a military or political sense, but this does not appear to be its use here. Instead it is generally thought to be metaphorical rather than literal. The whole nation had gone astray and this was described symbolically as a conspiracy against the Lord and his covenant. It was as if the entire nation had conspired to turn its back on the Lord and follow idols. Craigie, *et al.* believe this had its roots in Zedekiah's conspiracy against Nebuchadnezzar. See II Chron. 36:11-14 and Jer. 27. Some, such as Hyatt believe that the English word revolt is a better expression of the idea of the passage since conspiracy carries a political connotation while revolt encompasses more general possibilities. In verse 10, by saying that the people had "returned to the sins of their forefathers" Jeremiah may be speaking of the short-lived reforms of Josiah. If this is his meaning this would advance the date of composition of this section into the reign of Jehoahaz or later. However, he is probably speaking of the forefathers as in 11:6-8.

In verse 14 the Lord again tells Jeremiah not to pray for the people, similar to the injunction in 7:16. The idea in both of these places seems to be that the people are so deeply involved in their immorality and idolatry that they are beyond help. Now, only punishment awaits them. Looking at the practical import of this passage it is as grim reminder that one can depart so completely from the Lord that he reaches a point of no return. See also Heb. 10:26. In that passage, although the writer is not dealing with the same problem, the results are similar.

In verses 15-17 the writer includes a poetic section and then a short prose section. In the poetic oracles he pictures the Lord asking, "What is my beloved doing in my temple as she works out her evil schemes with many?" By calling Judah "my beloved" no doubt he is thinking of the marriage covenant and the infidelity of Israel, his wife and beloved. She is in the wrong place, for her conduct is not commensurate with her presence in the temple of the Lord. In the midst of her evil schemes she is offering consecrated sacrifices ("consecrated meat") which are truly a sacrilege. She engages in evil then rejoices in the Lord. Although she was planted as a choice olive tree, she has become so evil that the roar of a mighty storm will break her down and she will be set afire. Verse 17 returns to prose with the declaration that disaster will come upon Judah for her sins. Ritual sacrifice is never a substitute for holiness of life.

### **The plot against Jeremiah. 11:18-23**

Craigie, *et al.* along with Hyatt, Thompson, and others take this total block to include 11:18—12:6. Verses 18-23 tell of the plot against Jeremiah, and 12:1-6 constitute one of Jeremiah's confessions. These sections can certainly be thought of as a unit, but we will deal with the confession separately. A good number of commentators including Bright and Hyatt have rearranged the sequence of the text believing that their rearrangements make better sense out of the contents. There is a great deal of disagreement among scholars concerning the sequence in these rearrangements. Commentators also disagree on which portions are poetry and which are prose. Since poetry is characterized by symbolic ideas, exaggeration, and other forms of poetic license this may present problems in determining what is literal and what is symbolic. Craigie, *et al.* state that the majority of commentators classify this entire block except 11:21-23 as poetry. (Craigie, *et al.*, 1991, on CD.)

In verse 18 the prophet says that the Lord revealed to him that there was a plot to take his life. After Jeremiah's complaint ("confession") the Lord answers and informs him that his own family was involved in this plot (12:6). As the book progresses we see more and more reasons for Jeremiah's personal sorrow as well as his grief over the sins and apostasy of his nation. He experienced some truly heart-breaking personal catastrophes. He was barred from the temple even though he was a priest, the people of his hometown turned violently against him, his life was threatened, he was kidnapped, he was taken as a prisoner, he was thrown into a cistern partly full of mud and he sank into the mud, he was transported to Egypt against his will and no doubt died there. Throughout the book he was severely abused.

In verse 20 Jeremiah speaks to the Lord referring to him a righteous judge who tests the heart and mind. He uses the Hebrew words for "the kidneys" and "the heart." Ancient people believed that the seat of emotions, love, and hate resided in the internal organs, particularly the intestines and the kidney. Some primitive people also considered the liver to play a part in the emotions. This statement shows that Jeremiah did not lose his confidence in God, but asked God to show his vengeance against the evil doers.

This presents us with the question, "Was it right for Jeremiah to desire the vengeance of God against these people?" We see this in contrast to Jesus' statement on the cross, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." We need to see Jeremiah as a flesh and blood human being who may have been seeking personal vengeance against those people who had plotted

against him. On the other hand he may have wanted the Lord to take vengeance against them so that God's justice could be seen by all men.

Verse 21 returns to prose and the Lord speaks to Jeremiah about the men of Anathoth and their plot to kill the prophet. He speaks of himself as "a gentle lamb led to the slaughter." Just as an animal might walk quietly with its owner, not realizing that the owner's intent was to slaughter the animal, so Jeremiah was gentle among his own people, not realizing that their intent was to kill him. Earlier Isaiah 53:7 spoke of the suffering servant being led as a sheep to the slaughter, and this is applied to Christ in Acts 8:32-33. As far as we know Jeremiah was not married and killing him would assure everyone that there would be no descendants who might grow up to be like him. For a Jewish man, this was seen as a tragedy. In addition it was a great disgrace for a Jewish man to be rejected by the community in which he grew up. These things added to the woes of the prophet.

Verse 21 also tells us that the people of Anathoth wanted to kill him to prevent him from prophesying in the name of the Lord. This gives us a partial, though not complete answer to the question concerning their motivation. After all, paganism believed in and accepted many gods and the Lord was considered to be one of the many. Why then should they object to Jeremiah's prophesying in the name of the Lord since the Lord is just another god? The question remains partially unanswered. Commentators have offered various speculative theories to elaborate on the answer in verse 21. Hyatt says that a widely held theory is that Jeremiah advocated strict adherence to the "book of the Law" discovered in the temple during the reign of Josiah. As a result of the reforms of Josiah the kinsmen of Jeremiah may have lost their positions as priests when the pagan practices, sanctuaries, and altars were destroyed. Therefore the people of Anathoth and Jeremiah's own family were determined to kill him, probably holding him responsible for bringing about their expulsion as parts of the religious reforms. (Hyatt, 1956, pp. 911-913.) The speculations over verse 21 provide no real answer to this question but they continue to mount.

Verses 22-23 describe the punishment which the Lord has in store for the people of Anathoth who had plotted against Jeremiah. The young men would die by the sword and the sons and daughters would die of starvation. The people of Anathoth would suffer disaster when the year of punishment comes. The entire population of Anathoth was not destroyed however because Ezra 2:23 mentions that one hundred twenty-eight people of Anathoth returned from the Exile. Neh. 7:27 mentions the same number.

### **Jeremiah's confession and God's reply. 12:1-17**

Jeremiah's confession opens with two important items. First, he recognizes and affirms the righteousness of the Lord and that, as God, he acts in justice. On the other hand the prophet states that he has a legal case to bring against the Lord. He probably knows that he will not win the case, but it is only right that he confront the Lord with this complaint. That becomes the basis of his complaint. His complaint is this: since the Lord is a God of righteousness and justice, why would he allow the unrighteous to prosper while the godly are threatened and persecuted? Surely this is not justice either on a human or divine plane. The faithless are planted and take deep root. They live in ease and they grow and bear fruit. In contrast to this Jeremiah says, "You know me O Lord; you see me and test my thoughts about you." The question is, "Why

have you allowed these injustices to occur? What I want you to do is to drag my enemies out and butcher them!” (12:3)

The question is brought up a number of times in Scripture – *e.g.* Job, Jeremiah, and Habakkuk – but each approaches it from a little different point of view. The answer is never clearly given but in the case of Job and Habakkuk God’s sovereignty and his control of history are affirmed. In all of this Jeremiah sounds a good bit like Habakkuk who asked just about the same questions but he did so from a little different vantage point. Both Job and Habakkuk are assured that the Lord is sovereign, and evil has not escaped his scrutiny nor has the righteousness of the faithful gone unnoticed. The Lord tells Habakkuk that in God’s own time and in his own way he will execute justice. His will is finally going to prevail. See Hab. 1:5-11, 2:1-20. Jeremiah says that the people will think that God is not interested or that their deeds go unnoticed (12:4b). In many ways the Lord’s answer to Jeremiah is less comforting than that to Job and Habakkuk. In Jer. 12:5-17 for he gives a rather complete description of the coming punishment of Judah.

### **Symbolism and sin. 13:1-27**

The thirteenth chapter divides itself into five parts constituting five different subjects. Various commentators have labeled them differently, but each contributes to the general theme. Craigie, *et al.* list these divisions as follows:

1. The Linen Waistcloth (13:1-12a)
2. The Wine Jars (13:12b-14)
3. A Final Warning (13:15-17)
4. A Royal Warning (13:18-19)
5. The People’s Lot (13:20-27)

Craigie, *et al.* refer to this chapter as “Symbolism and Sin” (Craigie, *et al.*, 1991, on CD), Hyatt calls it “Parables and Warnings” (Hyatt, 1956, p. 921), and Harrison refers to it as “Five Warnings.” (Harrison, 1973, on CD.) Throughout the book Jeremiah uses a number of parabolic stories in which he himself becomes an actor. He also uses various symbols to convey his message. Other prophets did the same, but Jeremiah makes more extensive use of the “parabolic actor” than most others. The thread running through each of the five sections of this chapter is that the pride of the people will be crushed, and they will suffer in captivity.

### **The Linen Waistcloth. 13:1-11**

This is an autobiographical section in which Jeremiah is instructed to do certain things which turn out to have a symbolic meaning explained by the Lord. In this we have the prophet as a “parabolic actor.” Various commentators view the waistcloth in different ways. Normally Middle Eastern people of that day appear to have dressed in tunics rather than robes with waistcloths. For example on the Black Obelisk, discovered at Calah (Nimrud, Assyria) in 1846, the Israelite men who brought tribute to King Shalmaneser III are shown dressed in tunics. Various translations speak of this as a loincloth (NRSV), waistcloth (RSV), girdle (KJV, ASV), waistband (NASV), and linen belt (NIV). The exact nature of this waistcloth or girdle is not definitely known. Jeremiah was to purchase it new and not wash it (not put it in water). Washing it first

would have probably softened the linen. Under the Law, priests wore linen garments (Lev. 16:4).

An additional unknown factor in this narration is the instruction for the prophet to go to the Euphrates and leave the waistcloth in a crevice there. The Hebrew text uses the word “*perath*,” a word which is elsewhere translated Euphrates, referring to the river. Since Perath is about 350 miles (563 km.) from Anathoth, this would necessitate two round trips of about 700 miles (1,127 km.) each. This has caused some commentators including John Bright (Bright, 1965, p. 96) to conclude that the reference here is not to the Euphrates but to Parah, a small town casually mentioned in Josh. 18:23 where a spring was located. It was about four miles (6.4 km.) from Anathoth. Thompson and some others consider the possibility that this was a visionary experience rather than a literal one making all of it symbolic. Although there is no unanimity of opinion among scholars, fortunately this does not depreciate the value of the application.

Having hidden the waistcloth where it remained for “many days” Jeremiah is instructed to go back and retrieve it. When he dug it up he found that it was ruined and completely useless. Verses 8-11 give the interpretation of the events. The pride of Judah would be broken and destroyed. Since the people refused to listen to the Lord and had followed the inclinations of their own stubborn hearts to follow other gods, they would be like the waistcloth. They had been bound to the Lord in the beginning, but had become as worthless as the linen belt. They had been designed as a source of renown, praise, and honor to God, but they did not listen to him. Hyatt insists that the symbolism loses its meaning unless the Euphrates River is considered the correct translation rather than the small town of Parah near Anathoth. His reason for this is that it was from Mesopotamia that the destroyer of Jerusalem would ultimately come, (Hyatt, 1956, pp. 921-922).

In addition, scholars have debated the date of this oracle, some placing it late in the reign of Jehoiakim. They believe that Jehoiakim’s contact with Babylon and his change of allegiance from Egypt to Babylon after the battle of Carchemish (605 B.C.) may have given rise to the oracle. Other commentators believe the oracle is to be dated during the Exile which would emphasize the destruction of the “pride of Judah” probably referring to the temple. The lack of evidence prevents assigning a definite date to the oracle.

### **The wine jars. 13:12-14**

There seems to be no apparent link between the first oracle and the present one except that the penalty of sin is seen in both. This has caused some commentators to believe that we are really dealing with a miscellaneous collection rather than an organized set of oracles.

The words used for the containers of the wine properly refer to earthenware jugs or jars rather than wineskins (NIV). Commentators generally believe that there was a popular proverb which said, “Every wine jar will be filled.” It is thought that this proverb described a drunken party at which there was to be an over abundance of wine for everyone. The celebrations among the pagan cults involved a great deal of drunkenness, and since paganism had infiltrated Judah, the prophet makes use of that fact in his symbolism. This would probably produce the response, “Of course we know that proverb very well. Every jug is to be filled with wine.” Then Jeremiah’s



reply is that the Lord says that everyone who lives in the land will be filled with drunkenness from the king to the priests, to the prophets, and to all who live in Jerusalem. Then the Lord will smash them against each other, fathers and sons alike, and there will be no pity, mercy, or compassion to keep the Lord from destroying them.

### **A final warning. 13:15-17**

In this brief poem Jeremiah sounds a warning and calls for the repentance of the nation. Once again we see the Lord's patience and love for his people. In spite of their terrible evil, he offers hope. He appeals to them not to be arrogant but to give glory to God. They hope for light, but if they do not turn back to God they will find only darkness. The prophet symbolically expresses his own feelings of sorrow as he says his eyes will overflow with tears as he contemplates the inevitable captivity of the people if they continue in their sins.

### **A royal warning. 13:18-19**

This warning goes to the king and the queen mother. He appeals to them to come down from their thrones because their crowns are going to fall from their heads. That is, they will lose their domain. The cities of Judah and the Negev (the southern part of Judah) will be shut up and no one will be there to reopen them. Judah is sure to be taken into captivity.

The fact that Jeremiah mentions the queen mother may be significant for the dating of this oracle. The names of the mothers of the kings of Judah are given, but this is not true of the kings of Israel. In Judah the queen mother may have enjoyed special consideration. In I Kgs. 2:13-19 we have Bathsheba going to Solomon her son to make a request. Solomon had provided a throne for his mother to sit beside him at his right hand. In II Kgs. 24:8 the writer mentions Jehoiachin coming to the throne at age eighteen which is younger than any other king since Josiah. It is thought by some commentators that the queen mother might have had a more significant role as a counselor in the early part of Jehoiachin's reign than during the reign of any other king in the course of Jeremiah's ministry. According to II Kgs. 24:8 Jehoiachin's mother's name was Nehushta. If this is a correct assumption it would place the date of this oracle about 597 B.C., but the evidence is not conclusive.

### **The people's lot. 13:20-27**

The final oracle of this group deals with the fate of the people. The punishment of Jerusalem was inevitable if the people continued in their sins. Even though each of the segments of this chapter might have been spoken at different times, when compiled they carry a single theme throughout. We must keep in mind that the structure of Jeremiah is quite different from that of most of the other prophetic writings. Chronology is not foremost in the compiler's mind. We must also remember that all of this was a rewrite after Jehoiakim destroyed the original work of Jeremiah (Jer. 36).

After the death of Nabopolassar his son Nebuchadnezzar took his place as king of the Babylonian Empire. Almost immediately he began extensive expansion of his power and rule. He made numerous military excursions into the western lands including Palestine, Philistia, and Egypt.

The Babylonian Chronicle mentions some of these, and shows at least one important victory for the Egyptians. The people of Judah were in a quandary wondering if Babylon or Egypt would be their ultimate master. As we will see later, some thought it would be best to go to Egypt and cast their lot with that nation while others opposed this move and were finally taken to Babylon as captives. All of this shows that Judah was in a state of flux during this period. These things taken together have caused most commentators to conclude that the present oracle originated during the reign of Jehoiakim (609-598 B.C.) shortly before the Exile.

Verse 20 begins by challenging the people to look to the north and see their foes approaching. No doubt this refers to the Babylonians. Jerusalem, center of Judah's religious and political life, is the subject of this entire block. It is accused of failing to shepherd its flock. Jerusalem had tried to cultivate the favor of the Babylonians, seeking them as allies, but also paying tribute to them. These attempts to curry the favor of Babylon go all the way back to Josiah when he attempted to prevent Pharaoh Neco from assisting the Assyrians in the battle of Carchemish (605 B.C.) as they opposed the Babylonians under Nabopolassar.

Verse 22 presents a common question among the self-righteous and complacent; "Why is this happening to me?" The people of Judah never seem to see their own faults and sins until it's too late. The metaphor of exposure of their naked bodies would have been a vivid, repulsive, and offensive symbol for those whose culture forbade any exposure of the body. This was particularly offensive as it pertained to women. Jeremiah is striking a very sensitive note in this description. He compares the depth and hopelessness of Judah's sins to the impossibility of a leopard changing his spots or an Ethiopian changing his skin. This is not the idea of predestination as has been the interpretation of some, but it is a hyperbole to illustrate the extent of Judah's sins. The writer of Hebrews speaks of a person who can finally reach the point of no return in becoming hardened by sin. (See Heb. 10:26-27.) The Lord declares that he will scatter the people of Judah as the chaff which is driven by the wind. Once again in verse 25 he uses the exposure of the body to describe the humiliation of their utter defeat. They had been shameless in their immorality and other sins, now their ungodliness will be fully requited. "Woe to you, O Jerusalem! How long will you be unclean?" (13:27).

### **Catastrophes, confessions, and judgment. 14:1—15:9**

Various commentators divide this section in different ways. Some, including Bright, consider it to have six different sections. In 14:1-6 the oracle concerning the coming drought is followed by a confession of guilt, 14:7-9. The Lord's immediate reply to this, also condemning the false prophets is in 14:10-16. We then have a brief lament of the prophet in 14:17-18 followed by a picture of the people confessing their sins and the guilt of their fathers and appealing for mercy from the Lord, 14:19-22. In 15:1-4 there is the Lord's rejection of their plea stating that even if Moses and Samuel were to plead the case of Judah the Lord would not listen. In 15:5-9 we see the fate of Jerusalem.

Other commentators such as Thompson combine some of these and conclude that there are really only two basic sections. The first section is 14:1-16 where we are told of the drought, the people's confession of guilt, and the Lord's response. Then comes 14:17—15:9 which describes an-

other confession of guilt and an appeal for mercy. God's response however is negative because of the depth of their sins. We will follow Thompson's divisions.

### **Drought, confession, and the Lord's response. 14:1-16**

Rainfall is not abundant in Palestine, and failure of rain is a great catastrophe. The prophet pictures the nobles sending servants out to fetch water from the cisterns, only to find them dry. They return with empty jars. The ground is so dry that cracks appear in the soil. Farmers are dismayed and animals desert their young in search of water and pasture. The people appeal for mercy on the basis that the Lord is the hope of Israel and the savior in times of distress. They ask God not to be like a stranger or as a powerless warrior. God is among the people and the nation bears his name. However the Lord replies that the people love to wander without restraint and Jeremiah is again told not to pray for them. The prophet responds by blaming this on the prophets who have assured the people that there will be no famine and no war. However, the Lord says those prophet are false, telling lies in his name. These prophets will suffer the same fate as the people to whom they have lied. All will receive the punishment they deserve.

Verses 1-6 describe the extent of the drought. By speaking of the nobles sending out servants, the prophet is picturing the entire nation under this symbolic statement. The drought is so severe that even those in high positions cannot procure water. This is a very artistic description of its severity. Although the NIV translates the opening phrase as "her cities languish," almost all other versions translate it as "her gates languish." This is more acceptable to most commentators. The gates of a city were especially important to the ancient people because that was the place where judges gathered to render their decisions, and the wise men of the city gathered there to discuss the problems of the people. In addition, the gates were important in the protection of the city. Although they could be open for ingress and egress, they could be closed to protect the city in times of aggression. For the gates to languish was a very artistic poetic way for the prophet to make his point. The returning servants covered their heads as an ancient gesture of shame. Although they were not responsible for the fact that there was no water, nevertheless they experienced shame by not being able to carry out the mission for which they were sent. In verses 4-6 the picture changes to the farmers and the wild beasts. The young female abandons her fawn to search for water and grass to enable her to provide milk for her newborn. Truly, the drought has reached into every crevice of human and animal existence.

In verses 7-9 Jeremiah speaks as a spokesman for his people. Confessing sins, he and the people plead for God's mercy and help. The real basis for asking for God's intervention is the honor of the name and reputation of the Lord. He is the God of the people of Israel, their savior and hope, yet now he is as a stranger to them because his help is lacking in the time of Judah's need. He usually comes to Israel's aid in time of trouble, but they wonder now where is our God. The apostate children of the Lord face an emergency, and their confession of guilt is based on an immediate physical need, not on a desire to return the Lord.

Verse 10 ends the poetic portion of this block with the simple statement that Israel loves to wander, and there is no restraint. God will not listen to such prayers. Judgment is unavoidable. See also Prov. 28:9 where the writer says that "If anyone turns a deaf ear to the law, even his prayers are detestable." This should be a reminder today that God is not a benevolent father who pays no

attention to the conduct of his children, but is willing to grant their wishes when they see trouble on the horizon. Instead, prayer must emit from a life of holiness and godliness. Verses 11-12 reinforce this principle. Observing rituals – fasting, burnt offerings, and grain offerings – is not an acceptable substitute for godliness and devotion to the Lord. The punishment for infidelity still stands; the Lord will smite them by sword, famine, and plague.

Verses 13-16 constitute a dialogue between the Lord and the prophet. We need to remember that the word “prophet” is not limited to the prophets of the Lord, but was used to identify anyone who claimed to have a word from a god or from the Lord. In addition, the credentials of the prophets of the Lord may or may not be recognized or accepted by the people. There were certainly competitive false prophets claiming to be speaking from the Lord both in Jeremiah’s time and during the ministry of other prophets of the Lord. Ahab summoned prophets, some of whom claimed to speak in the name of the Lord (I Kgs. 22:1-12). See also I Kgs. 13:7-22, Neh. 6:11-12, etc. Jeremiah attempted to explain to God that the behavior of the people was due to those prophets who had assured them that neither war nor famine would come but they could be sure of perpetual peace and prosperity. It seems to have been typical of the false prophets to bring an optimistic message which they knew would be acceptable and welcome by the people and give assurances of blessings to come. The people chose to believe them rather than Jeremiah whom they probably saw as a prophet of doom. The false prophets were optimistic while Jeremiah was pessimistic. The Lord told Jeremiah that such prophets lied in the name of the Lord. Their divinations were fraudulent and their visions were false delusions of their own minds.

Verses 15-16 tell of the doom of these false prophets. Since the Lord never authorized or commissioned them Jeremiah is assured that those prophets would die by the sword and their bodies would lie in the streets with no one to bury them. This was a great disgrace in the eyes of the Israelites. Even in modern times the desecration of the deceased is held to be grossly contemptuous. Jeremiah’s plea for the people is rejected by the Lord. The people should have been able to identify a false prophet by seeing that his proclamation was contrary to the covenant.

### **Lament and the prayer for mercy. 14:17-22**

Once again Jeremiah expresses his personal sorrow for the nation he loves. He sees the coming destruction of prophet, priest, and the nation. Verses 17-18 speak of the ravages of war being suffered by the people. In the country he sees the bodies of those who have been slain and in the city he sees those who die from famine, similar to 8:1-3. Suffering is everywhere and starvation is rampant. Jeremiah refers to Jerusalem and the people of Judah as “the virgin daughter of my people,” 14:17. He sheds many tears in his sorrow for his nation. The prophets and people have gone to a land they do not know, probably referring to Babylon. Jeremiah’s description of the plight of the people has led some commentators to believe that this oracle may be dated about the time of the first Babylonian invasion in 597 B.C. That resulted in partial exile, the looting of the treasures of the temple, and great destruction. See II Kgs. 24:8-17.

Verses 19-22 are directed to the Lord. Jeremiah is speaking, but is also representing the people and pleading their case before the Lord. These verses are similar to 8:15. In this time of emergency and sure destruction, the people ask if God has completely forsaken them and the holy city of Zion. They claimed that the Lord had afflicted them so severely that they were beyond any

expectations of healing. They had hoped for peace but these were false hopes. It appears however that they had not truly repented although they confessed their wickedness.

Although Jeremiah is voicing this in behalf of the people, there can be no doubt that he himself also feels unworthy and sinful, and this confession is, in part, his own confession. On the other hand, the people were probably simply asking for deliverance from the tragedies which had already begun. Will the Lord not defend his holy place, the temple? Will he allow his name to be dishonored by the invaders? Has he forgotten the covenant he made at Sinai? Will he not keep his promise to their forefathers? This language almost leaves one with the feeling that the people, speaking through Jeremiah, are challenging God's own righteousness and integrity without considering their own need to repent. Hosea pictures a similar situation where the people vow to return to the Lord, but God knows that their resolve is shallow and meaningless. "Your love is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears." Hos. 6:1-7. There is the acknowledgement that the worthless idols are not the source of rain, and they can do nothing. Only the Lord can do all this. However, there is an important element missing. The lament places strong emphasis on God's obligation to fulfill his side of the covenant, but nothing is said about Israel's imperative to keep their obligations to the Lord. It seems that time has not changed this characteristic of mankind from the seventh century B.C. until our own present century.

#### **God's response. 15:1-4**

Normally when a prophet stands up and pleads for God's mercy on the people we expect God to respond with words of forgiveness and hope. Jeremiah, speaking for the community at large makes this plea but he meets with an almost shocking refusal. God responds by citing two illustrious intercessors in Israel's history, Moses and Samuel. See Ex. 32:11-14, Num. 14:13-19, I Sam. 7:8-9, 12:19-25. The Lord says that even if those two great prophets of the past were standing before him pleading Israel's cause, "My heart would not go out to this people," 15:1. Time after time the Lord had appealed to the people to return to him, but these appeals were always ignored and Israel refused. Now they have reached the point of no return. This, unfortunately, is a response heard throughout the book. On a number of occasions Jeremiah is told not to pray for these people. "Send them away, let them go," is the reply. When they ask where shall we go, the answer is poetic. There is not a sense of predestination in verse 2 but a firm pronouncement that God's decree stands because of the continual evil of the people. He will no longer reach out to the people. Therefore those who are going to be killed will be killed, those who are to die by the sword will die by the sword, those who are going to starve will starve, and those who are to go into captivity will go into captivity. This is a strong expression of hopelessness for the disobedient. The Lord is not going to renege.

To further strengthen his statement, the Lord adds that four additional kinds of destroyers will plague the people for their sins. The sword will kill and the dogs will drag the corpses away to be eaten by the animals and the birds of prey. The people shall be made abhorrent to the kingdoms of the earth. The reason? Because of the sins of Manasseh the son of Hezekiah. He was shown to be one of the most evil of the kings of Judah. (See II Kgs. 21:10-15, 23:26, 24:3.) The evil of this king had a profound influence on the conduct of the nation.

### **The fate of Jerusalem. 15:5-9**

Verses 5-9 follow the theme of 1-4, and give a further description of the fate of the holy city. The ravages of the invading Babylonians will have finally come upon these ungodly people. This no doubt is speaking of the final invasion and destruction of the city by Nebuchadnezzar in 597 B.C. (II Kgs. 24:10-17). The book of Lamentations captures this tone, and gives vivid descriptions of these events. Judah had rejected the Lord, and now they face the consequences of the Lord's rejection of Judah. They will become an unknown among the nations. No one will pity her, no one will mourn over her, and no one will stop to ask about her. Judah will have become a hiss and byword. The reason for this is that "'You have rejected me' declares the Lord," (15:6). Because of their conduct the Lord will lay his hands on Judah and destroy her. He can no longer show compassion, and they will be carried away like the chaff from the threshing floor. The Lord had shown compassion in the past, but now only punishment awaits them. Instead of Israel being a nation as numerous as the sands of the seashore, the widows of Israel will be as numerous as the sands of the seashore. Even the mothers of Israel will suffer the loss of their young sons, and they will be brought down in anguish. The survivors will be put to the sword in the presence of their enemies. Such is the fate of those who go so deeply into sin and evil.

## Chapter VI

### Oracles Confessions And Other Matters

#### 15:6—20:18

### Introduction

Once again we are faced with the difficulty of organization of the book. We have a collection of material, the sections of which are somewhat unrelated. Commentators generally classify these chapters under a number of categories, but no label or heading fits for the whole block. Both Hyatt and Bright list these chapters under five different headings although their arrangement and divisions are different (Hyatt, 1956, p. 792, Bright, 1965, pp. 105-134). Thompson lists them under fifteen different labels (Thompson, 1980 p. 127).

### Jeremiah's confession. 15:10-18

As mentioned in Chapter I, "Introduction to Jeremiah," the confessions of Jeremiah are sometime referred to as his lamentations or complaints. In 15:10-21 we have the second of these confessions intermingled with the responses of the Lord. Jeremiah protests to his mother regretting that he was ever born. Remember that in 1:4-5 the Lord stated that Jeremiah was chosen by God even before his birth. Now he regrets that he was ever born. This seems to be tantamount to his wishing he could reject the mission to which God had called him. Throughout the book we see how the prophet contends with God, and objects to much of what God is doing or has done. The prophet contends for righteousness but he is cursed by everyone. He has cheated no one – he hasn't borrowed money, nor has he lent money – yet he has the respect of no one. See Deut. 23:19 concerning borrowing, interest, and usury.

In verse 11 the Lord speaks, assuring the prophet that he will be delivered and his enemies will plead with him in times of disaster and distress. However, because of textual variations and problems of interpretation there are different views concerning the exact meaning of this verse. The Masoretic Text (MT) differs from the Septuagint (LXX) and this is taken into account by the commentators. However, they frequently come to different conclusions concerning its meaning. Bright follows the LXX and translates the verse as follows: "But I swear, O Yahweh, for their good I have served thee, and with thee for the foe interceded in the time of his trouble and woe. Ah, but thou knowest!" (Bright, 1965, p. 106.) Thompson however follows the MT and translates it in this way: "Yahweh said: 'Surely I have made an enemy for you for good; surely I have laid on you in a time of evil and in a time of distress, the enemy.'" (Thompson, 1980 p. 391.) Craigie, *et al.* translate it, "The Lord answered, 'Have I not strengthened you for good, have I not intervened for you in the time of trouble, and the time of distress because of the enemy?'" (Craigie, *et al.*, 1991, on CD.) The LXX begins the verse with the expression, "So be it" or "Amen." However, the LXX does not use the word **ἀμην** (*amēn*), "Amen" which is universally found in the New Testament. Because of these difficulties some scholars believe this is a misplaced verse and they eliminate it completely. Most of the widely accepted English translations favor the MT which introduces the verse, "The Lord said . . ." This would mean that Jeremiah's complaint is seen in verse 10 and the Lord's reply begins in verse 11.

The different translations just given serve to illustrate the two dominant interpretations of the verse. If the LXX is followed the most probable interpretation is that Jeremiah's complaint goes through verse 11, meaning that Jeremiah is defending himself against any accusations having to do with the curses being spoken against him. He is speaking in a way which sounds like an oath, saying, "Lord so be it (or "I swear") if I have not had the benefit even of my enemies in my heart, pleading with you Lord on their behalf." The RSV reads: "So let it be, O Lord, if I have not entreated thee for their good, if I have not pleaded with thee on behalf of the enemy in the time of trouble and in the time of distress!" (Jer. 15:11, RSV.) If the MT is followed probably the best interpretation is that the Lord assures Jeremiah that he will not be forsaken, but the Lord will stand by him in spite of the accusations and curses which are coming from his enemies. In addition the Lord promises that his enemies will be punished. Thompson concludes his comment with this statement: "The possible renderings of this verse are manifold, and it was difficult to choose one rather than another." (Thompson, 1980, p. 393.)

The rendering of verse 12 also presents some problems, but they are not as varied as verse 11. The passage generally asks the rhetorical question, "Can a man break iron – iron from the north – or bronze?" The expression "from the north" once again refers to the Babylonians who invaded Palestine. They could not go directly west from Babylon because the lengthy trip across the desert would be impossible for an army. Instead, they would go north from Babylon through Syria and then turn south to go down to Judah. The contrast concerning breaking iron may be describing the iron from the area of the Black Sea. It was very high quality and much harder than its bronze counterpart. The text seems to symbolically refer to Babylon as having armaments of the high quality Black Sea iron while Judah has inferior armament symbolized by the bronze (weakness – softer metal). Clearly the armaments of Judah could not repel the massive strength of the Babylonians. Because of their sins, the Lord would give their wealth and treasures as plunder for the invaders. All of this was because of Judah's sins. They will become slaves of their enemies in a strange land. Notice the similarity between 15:13-14 and 17:3-4.

Verses 15-21 continue the dialogue between Jeremiah and the Lord. This is a continuation of the prophet's confession. He defends himself to the Lord contending that he has been faithful to his mission even though hardship, loneliness, and hatred from the people have attended him. The Lord's reply is a sort of a mild rebuke urging Jeremiah to get rid of his self pity. The Lord reassures the prophet that he will be protected by a wall of bronze, and that his attackers will not prevail.

In verse 15 Jeremiah says that he knows that the Lord understands the prophet's situation, but he wants to talk to God about his true feelings. This should not be understood as Jeremiah's arrogance so much as the honest recognition of the tension experienced by every true servant of the Lord when faced with hardships, loneliness, and rejection. He looks within his own heart to test his fidelity and sensitivity to God's calling, but in honesty he is also faced with the natural human tendency of self preservation and security. He needs God's continual help, he has suffered for the Lord's sake, he has been reproached, and persecuted as he tries to carry out the mission assigned to him by the Lord. The prophet is not shy about his complaint. There is boldness in his words of as he speaks to the Lord. Underlying all of this seems to be the thought that the prophet wants the Lord to call up the past and remember how faithful he has been – "think of how I have suffered reproach for your sake" 15:15.



This reminder continues in verses 16-18. Jeremiah had eaten up the words of the Lord as he revealed them to him. This idea of “eating the scroll” is also found in Ezekiel (Ezek. 2:8—3:3) and in the book of Revelation where John is told to do the same thing (Rev. 10:9-11). Although no scroll is mentioned with Jeremiah at this point, the prophet affirms the idea of ingesting the words of God. When John was told to eat the scroll in Revelation he was told it would be sweet in his mouth but sour in his stomach. Unlike John, Jeremiah says that the Lord’s words were his joy and his heart’s delight, “For I bear your name, O Lord God Almighty” (15:16). Thompson says that a literal translation of this would be, “Thy name was called upon me.” To the ancient people, particularly in Israel, a name was of great importance, especially the name of God. It denotes ownership and a closeness of a person to the Lord. However, it may have been that this closeness to God had become the very reason for his persecutions, isolation, and curses from his enemies. We must not forget that Jeremiah worked during the time of the discovery of the book of the Law and the reforms of Josiah. Perhaps the expression here concerning the word of the Lord had a special meaning to the prophet, bolstering the case of his fidelity to the Lord.

Verse 17 describes a sort of isolation from society which the prophet experienced because of his devotion to his mission and to the Lord. While others make merry with the revelers the prophet sits alone because the hand of the Lord is upon him. He is indignant when he sees their behavior. In this context he expresses his plaintive cry about his pain and suffering. He sees no end to this isolation and agony, and above all, it seems to be so unjust. His wounds are incurable. Although he expresses his next thought as a question in most translations, it can also be taken as a statement. The prophet actually accuses God of being deceitful to him – a bold charge indeed (vs. 18). He states (or asks as a rhetorical question) that the Lord had been like a deceitful brook – a stream which becomes dry in the summer – or a spring which fails or dries up in the summer. Has the “spring of living water” (2:13) become a dried up and disappointing illusion or an undependable brook? In this section we have an unflattering but true picture of the man who came to be called “the weeping prophet.” Compare the mood and accusations here with those in 20:7-10.

There is a boldness and frankness in the prophet’s confessions. He is fully aware that the Lord knows his thoughts and his heart, and in his confessions he does not try to cover up his true feelings even when those feelings express a certain degree of hostility toward the Lord. This is a true confession and lamentation expressed by the prophet who sees his nation enveloped in evil and he feels that he has been, at least partially, abandoned by the Lord. As a single voice calling for national repentance he is persecuted, ridiculed, and cursed by the very people he is trying to lead back to God. He makes no effort to hide his frustrations, his thoughts, or his complaints from God. He finds out that honesty with God opens a door for the Lord to speak frankly to him but he does not escape divine correction.

### **The Lord’s response. 15:19-21**

Jeremiah had voiced serious complaints against the Lord, accusing him of deceit and inattention to the prophet’s needs. The Lord will give him the necessary strength but there are conditions attached. The conduct of the prophet has not been exemplary here and the Lord tells him that he, like his countrymen, must repent if he wants to be God’s servant. That repentance must be accompanied by speaking words which have a true message from God, not the worthless oratory of the other so-called prophets. He must not turn aside and become like the people to whom he

speaks, but must turn them toward the Lord. God will then build a bronze wall around him and their attacks will not destroy him. The Lord will be with him to protect him and save him from the hands of the wicked and redeem him from the grasp of the cruel ones.

Jeremiah had indulged in considerable self pity in his confession and he had expressed it to the Lord in a somewhat hostile manner. He had often called the people to repent and turn back to God, but now the Lord tells him that he also must repent. This is a reminder that our own sins might not appear to us as serious as those of another person, but they still constitute a violation of our relationship to the Lord. No doubt Jeremiah felt completely justified in his expression of self pity, and blaming God for his plight, but this did not excuse him. His “position” as a spokesman for God did not displace the fact that he was primarily the servant of God. Not until the prophet was accepting of that fact was he allowed to be God’s spokesman once again. Honest and true heartfelt confession has a therapeutic quality which moves effectively toward the healing of the soul. As Jeremiah listens to the rebuke of the Lord he learns this. Once again J.A. Thompson has a pertinent comment: “The bitterness of the prophet’s experiences had almost closed his mouth and brought him close to losing sight of his divine commission and his confidence in the one who had commissioned him. He had almost renounced his calling (cf. 20:7-9). Yahweh now bids him to ‘turn back’ to God and to renew his trust in God.” (Thompson, 1980, p. 398.) This is a principle which ministers must always keep in mind. Let’s remember that the word “minister” means “servant.”

### **Jeremiah’s life as a mirror of his message. 16:1-13**

Scholars are divided over the structure of this block. The NIV shows the entire passage as prose, but Thompson and others show it as part poetry (vss. 1-9) and part prose (vss. 10-13). Scholars are also divided concerning whether or not this is an authentic part of the work of the prophet. These criticisms and differences are levied against many passages in the book partly because of their unique vocabulary, style, and descriptions compared with these characteristics in the book as a whole. As we have stated before, the book is not a well organized presentation and we should not be surprised to find some of these differences among commentators and linguists.

This section is basically autobiographical as Jeremiah describes some things about his celibacy and therefore his lack of family life. His loneliness and ostracism from society are reflected in the fate of the nation. The people will be taken into captivity and the loss of sons and daughters reflects Jeremiah’s lack of offspring of his own. They will be lonely in a land they do not know, and will be away from the temple and from God’s own land. Jeremiah’s lonely life of celibacy and social rejection is symbolic of Judah’s coming fate.

Verses 1-4 tell us that Jeremiah’s celibacy was directed by the Lord. This was considered a great disappointment and sacrifice among the Hebrews. Marriage and the rearing of children assured the continuation of the family name which was very important among most culture of the ancient Middle East. The call to celibacy here is unique in the Old Testament. Fleming James mentions that this prohibition certainly came in the very early part of the prophet’s ministry because ordinarily marriages were arranged and took place in one’s early years of maturity.

James brings an interesting insight on this prohibition:

The young prophet then must pass his days without a home, that he might be (as other prophets before him) a living sign of the impending doom which rendered all homes meaningless. But this was not all. Ordinary kindly intercourse with neighbors and friends must be shunned. He dare not be a sympathetic guest either in the house of mourning or in the house of feasting. For Yahweh had taken away His peace from this people, and the prophet as Yahweh's representative must not live in peace with them. (16:1ff).

(James, 1939, p. 308.)

The mirror reflection of this is that the calamities to come on Judah would leave families without fathers or mothers, and parents without sons and daughters. Families would be devastated. Jeremiah personified these calamities. Some will die of diseases, famine or the sword. Apparently so many will die that there will be no way to bury all of them and the corpses would rot like the refuse on the ground or be eaten by the animals. To the Hebrews, nothing was more repulsive than this.

Verses 5-9 tell of funeral meals and mourning for the dead. Among the Hebrews as well as pagan nations there was ritual mourning over the dead. Pagans cut themselves as signs of grief or intense supplication to their gods (I Kgs. 18:27-28), but Israel was strictly forbidden to participate in such practices for the dead (Lev. 19:27-28, Deut. 14:1). In these verses Jeremiah's isolation from society is underlined. He was not permitted to enter a house where there was a funeral meal or join in his society's normal practices of mourning the dead.

The reason for this was that the sins of Judah had caused the Lord to withdraw his blessings, his love, and his compassion from the people. Thompson calls attention to the fact that the three words, "peace," "steadfast love," and "compassion" were all-encompassing of God's total care for the people. These were broad words expressing the depth of the love of the Lord in every facet of the lives of his children. (Thompson, 1980, p. 405.) The punishments, death, and suffering of the people were not accidental, but were God's own visitation of judgment against them. Mourning then was inappropriate under such circumstances. In verse 5 Jeremiah is forbidden to attend funeral gatherings, but in verses 8-9 this is extended to joyful gatherings, feasting, and weddings. God is going to bring an end to the sounds of joy and gladness. Underlying all of this is the fact that Jeremiah could not participate in the sharing of either the joys or sorrows of his people. This was a symbolic expression of God's own purpose in isolating himself from the sinful people. For one who was so intensely and emotionally involved in the life of his nation, this isolation imposed by God must have been especially painful to Jeremiah.

In verses 10-13 the people are pictured as being oblivious to the reason for God's displeasure and the coming calamities of which Jeremiah has been warning. Hardened by the continual practices of sin, the people could not see their own faults. Four things are mentioned here to describe the conduct of the forefathers, and part of the reasons for God's judgment. (1) Their fathers had forsaken the Lord, meaning that the following generations had not been taught. (2) They served and worshipped other gods. (3) They forsook the Lord. (4) They did not keep his law. The obvious overlapping of these statements seems to be an emphatic way to express the seriousness of their

departure from the Lord. Furthermore, the Lord says that this generation has done even more evil than their fathers had done. Therefore they will be thrown out of their homeland and taken to a land that neither they nor their fathers have known. There they will serve other gods night and day, and the Lord will show them no favor.

### **A brief interlude: God's promise of restoration. 16:14-15**

These verses are found almost exactly in 23:7-8. The fact that they fit closely into that context has caused many commentators to conclude that their appearance in 16:14-15 is misplacement since some scholars see this as an abrupt change in tone. Following this the prophet returns to his condemnation of the sins of the people. This however was not out of the ordinary for the prophets of the Old Testament. Many commentators believe that this sounds like a post exilic statement (Frost, 1971, pp. 374-375 and Hyatt, 1956, p. 989.). However, this is not a necessary conclusion and there is no unanimity among competent scholars.

Thompson refers to these two verses as "A New Exodus" (Thompson, 1980, p. 409.) which appears to be an appropriate title for the section. The Hebrews correctly looked back to the exodus from Egypt as the time of the formation of their nation, and saw the hand of the Lord in the giving of the Law and the many other events of that period. Apparently this whole expression, "As surely as the Lord lives, who brought the Israelites up out of Egypt," had become a sort of oath confirming the validity of whatever they were saying. The hallmark of their identity as the people of God was wrapped up in these words. The restoration of Judah after the Exile would become the new hallmark of their nationhood: "As surely as the Lord lives who brought the Israelites up from the land of the north and out of all of the countries where he had banished them," 16:14-15. These verses affirm the fact that the threat of doom is never the Lord's last message. He constantly offers hope if his people will repent. For Judah this hope was expressed in their response to the Lord's call and their consequent restoration to the land.

This, and similar passages are interpreted by some Dispensationalists as a promise that fleshly Israel would be restored to the Promised Land at the time of the second coming of Christ, that the temple would be restored on its original site, and portions of the Law of Moses would be re-instituted. Even a cursory reading of these two verses however shows that Jeremiah is speaking of the time when the Lord would bring Israel back from the "land of the north" which has been consistently used to identify Babylon and the Exile. The original recipients of Jeremiah's message would have had no reason whatsoever to interpret this passage as the expectation of a restoration of the nation of Israel at the time of the second coming of the Lord. The New Testament never attaches such a meaning to it.

### **Further judgment on Israel. 16:16-18**

Once again we see the lack of systematic organization of Jeremiah's messages. Verses 1-21 of this chapter basically speak of Israel's sins, but there are interruptions or side-topics along the way such as 16:14-15 and 16:19-21. In verses 16-18 he returns to Judah's sins which he began in verses 1-13. The imagery of the fishermen is also found in Ezek. 29:4-5, Am. 4:2, and Hab. 1:14-17. He also pictures the Lord hunting Judah as animals would be hunted, looking in every crevice. None will be overlooked or escape the eyes of the Lord. He emphasizes the seriousness

of their sins by saying that they will pay double for their iniquities and idolatries. Most English versions translate “lifeless forms,” 16:18 (NIV), as carcasses. Perhaps the prophet has in mind previous statements about corpses being left unburied along with the lifeless forms of the idols as the source of pollution of the land. The Lord considered Israel as his children, the land as His land, and Israel as His inheritance. The crime was that they had polluted all of this with their abominable idols and wicked lives.

### **The conversion of the nations. 16:19-21**

In this short section Jeremiah speaks of the name of the Lord going to other nations. This idea is not as frequently found in Jeremiah as it is in some of the other prophets. Short unrelated oracles such as 16:19-21 have caused many commentators to consider them as additions by an editor or misplaced oracles. However, the practice of changing his course to an unrelated subject is found frequently in Jeremiah, and it appears to be one of the unique characteristics of the book. This is not necessarily evidence of an addition by an editor or a misplaced oracle. A well attested characteristic of the book is its basic lack of topical or chronological organization.

In this brief section Jeremiah assigns three titles to the Lord. They are: “The Lord is my strength,” “The Lord is my stronghold,” and “The Lord is my refuge.” These expressions are frequently found in the book of Psalms. In addition, the idea of the conversion of the nations was not foreign to the Israelite prophetic expectation. See Is. 2:1-5, Mic. 4:1-5, and Zech. 8:20-23.

It is not clear whether the Lord begins speaking in verse 20 or 21. Many commentators think that verse 20 is a continuation of Jeremiah’s statements. However, the word “therefore,” being spoken by the Lord, seems to show that Jeremiah’s statement ends at verse 19 and the Lord begins his statement with the words, “Do men make their own gods?” Many commentators however include verse 20 as part of Jeremiah’s statement. The Lord then affirms that he will make his name known among the nations (as in verse 19).

### **A group of miscellaneous sayings. 17:1-27**

Hyatt divides chapter 17 into eight sections while Bright divides it into seven sections. Craigie, *et al.* basically treat the entire chapter as “Sin and Consequences,” but they divide it into seven subsections. Thompson sees it made up of six sections. All agree that it contains a variety of sayings related to Judah’s sins, wisdom in a sort of proverbial form, another confession (lament) of Jeremiah, and Sabbath observance. Once again we are faced with a variety of intermingled miscellaneous topics and literary forms.

### **Judah and her sins. 17:1-4**

This pericope is referred to as a judgment oracle. The writer begins by stating that the sins of Judah are inscribed indelibly on the tablets of their hearts. This inscribing is done symbolically with an iron tool and a hard flint point. Most translations use the word “diamond” instead of “flint.” An iron instrument was used to engrave on hard surfaces, but here the writer emphasizes the hardness of Judah’s heart by stating that a flint or diamond point had to be used because the

deep rooted sins of the people had hardened their hearts so completely. The expression is strong, indicating not just “written” on their hearts but “engraved” or “etched” into their hearts and on the horns of their altars.

We should notice the expression concerning the horns of the altars. Archaeological excavations have shown that the horns of the altars were protrusions on each corner of the altar used to tie down the animal and to hold the wood in place. With many of the offerings in Leviticus a stipulation was made that a portion of the blood was to be smeared on the horns of the altar. See Lev. 4:7-34, 9:9, and 16:18. This appears to symbolize the removal of sins from the person, to the animal through the sacrifice on the altar. This was also a practice used in some pagan sacrifices. Here Jeremiah says that the sins of the people will never be forgiven but are engraved or etched on the horns of their (pagan) altars and the blood could never erase them. It is interesting that the prophet refers to the altars in the plural. This might indicate that he is including their sacrifices to the Canaanite deities as well as their sacrifices to the Lord.

Verses 2-3 state two important truths. First, even their children, when they see the Asherah poles and the altars will not be reminded of the covenant their fathers made with the Lord, but of the Canaanite deities currently being worshipped. Second, the Lord says that their land (“my mountain”) along with the wealth and treasures of the people will become plunder for the invaders. This took place in 587 B.C. when Nebuchadnezzar invaded and plundered the temple in Jerusalem and the treasures of the nation. See II Kgs. 25:13-17.

It is interesting to read about the grandeur of the structure of the temple and passion of the people in I Kgs. 5-8. We see the elaborate planning, preparation, building, and dedication of the temple when Solomon was king. Then compare that with the degradation of the people’s religious practices, their morals, and ethics as described throughout the books of I–II Kings, the various prophets, and especially in Jeremiah. It did not happen all at once, but sin has a way of being persistent and making small, almost unnoticed gains until God’s people find themselves far away from their original mooring. The deceitful part of this is that so many of these “minor offenses” seem so reasonable and desirable, yet they ultimately lead us away from the Lord. Verse 4 states another sad part of all of this. All of the punishment coming to them was the product of their own conduct. It was their own fault. We reap what we sow.

### **A blessing and a curse. 17:5-8**

Although this is a new pericope, it certainly has a dynamic connection to the previous message. The prophet contrasts the curse and the blessing by using a bush (literally a scrub bush) planted in the wastelands compared with a tree planted by a fresh stream. See also Ps. 1 for a description of this. Once again, scholars are divided when it comes to date, source, and authorship of this pericope, some believing that Jeremiah acquired the illustration from the Psalm and others believing the opposite. In this passage Judah is the strong man who relies on his own strength as represented by the bush in the wasteland. He will never see prosperity when it comes, and will only dwell in parched places of the desert.

The book of Deuteronomy gives a number of blessing-cursing passages. In verse 8 Jeremiah gives us a contrast with the blessed man who is like a tree planted by a stream of water. He does

not fear the heat (difficult times) his leaves are always green, he has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit. In Palestine droughts were common and were a major cause of famine. In Egypt the area around the Nile River is excellent for farming but much of the rest of the country is desert. Both the bush in the dry wasteland and the tree beside the river experience the drought. However, since the tree by the stream has thrust its roots toward the stream, it easily survived the drought, but the bush in the wasteland is parched and dry, and its experience during the drought is completely different. Jeremiah himself had to learn repentance during his own disappointments in the working of the Lord. See 15:12-21. The message there and here is survival. By finally holding to the Lord, Jeremiah survived the drought in his life, and became like the tree planted by the stream of water. In this brief pericope we have wisdom and prophecy combined.

### **God, the heart knower and hope of Israel. 17:9-13**

The basic theme of these verses is that God knows the heart, but it can be very deceitful to the individual. In ancient times the heart was thought to control the mind and a person's thinking. The visceral organs, intestines, kidneys, etc, were thought to control the emotions or feelings. In this brief pericope the Lord says that an individual's own mind may move him in a certain direction, only to find out that he has been fooled into thinking it was correct when really he was on the wrong road. This says that the mind needs an external guide or instructor. From a practical point of view this passage teaches us that decisions made without sufficient guidance exposes man to great peril. The only solution is to listen to the instruction and guidance of the Lord. "I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve." Retribution is grounded in divine justice.

There is a link between verses 5-8 and 9-11. In both he is dealing with trust, decisions, and behavior. In each he is telling his recipients that the Lord rewards (blesses) those who respond to his guidance, but curses those who trust in their own strength and reject him. He illustrates the principle by referring to a partridge. Some commentators believe that this comes from an ancient proverb. It was thought that a partridge would sit on eggs she had not laid, and the resulting chicks would not be like the partridge at all. Consequently as the birds grew they would leave their false mother and seek their own kind. So also riches falsely or unjustly gained would ultimately flee (disappear) from the dishonest man and he would be seen as a fool for depending on that for his security. The word *fool* among the ancient Hebrews had a different connotation than it has for us. When we use the word we think of stupid decisions, foolish talking, or irrational behavior. For the ancient people this word not only involved the stupid and foolish, but it was also connected to immoral or unethical behavior involving one who was in rebellion.

Verses 12-13 give the contrast or solution to this dilemma. The Lord of glory who sits on his exalted throne in the sanctuary is indeed the hope of Israel. All who forsake him will be put to shame and their names will be written in the dust because they have forsaken the spring of living water. The prophet frequently uses water as a symbol of the Lord's care for his people. Some have seen this passage as a contradiction with 7:1-15 where the idea of God dwelling in a structure (temple) is under attack and Israel considering the structure as a sort of superstitious place of magical arts. In 17:12-13 the prophet is not speaking of the temple in the superstitious way that the pagans viewed their temples, but to impress the fact that one does not come into the presence

of God in worship while living a life of dishonesty, evil, immorality, and unethical behavior. The Lord demands something from his people that pagan religions never demanded.

### **Jeremiah's third confession. 17:14-18**

Craigie, *et al.*, have a vivid label for this confession: "Heal Me, Destroy Them." Certainly the prophet is asking for healing and justice to be done, but the above label seems a bit severe in light of Jeremiah's constant pleas for the nation to repent. However he never overlooks the necessity for justice and judgment.

In verse 14 Jeremiah begins his "confession" by asking for healing and salvation, being confident that if the Lord did this he would indeed be healed and saved. He felt the wounds and losses of his nation very deeply. He also knew that their sins were not his sins. Therefore he asked to be healed and saved. In contrast, verse 15 speaks of the accusations of the scoffers. They were telling the prophet that there is not sufficient evidence that he is delivering the word of the Lord and challenging him to show its fulfillment. Jeremiah's personal frustration is evident.

Linguists tell us that there can be a slight change in the vocalization of the words of verse 15 which would change the translation. Most English versions translate it in a similar way as the NIV: "I have not run away from being your shepherd." On the other hand, the RSV translates the phrase in this way: "I have not pressed them to send evil." It is difficult to interpret, but using either translation the prophet seems to say that he did not desire to see the coming day of despair but that he had not left his job of being God's shepherd for the people. He was simply delivering God's message to the nation. We must keep in mind that this is a response to the complaints of the people. He appeals to the Lord not to be a terror to him because the Lord is his refuge. Instead, let his persecutors, accusers and scoffers be put to shame. Let *them* be the ones who are terrified by the Lord. Bring on *them* the day of disaster. Frequently in the Psalms a lament or complaint is answered with a statement of assurance from the Lord. However, there is no such assurance or answer given to Jeremiah in this passage.

### **Sabbath observance. 17:19-27**

In this passage Jeremiah singles out a specific commandment from the Law to emphasize the importance of obedience to that commandment. Usually however, he speaks in general terms of keeping the covenant. This prose section seems to be somewhat detached from the preceding topics. Because of these and other considerations many critical scholars either believe it is misplaced or that it is not an authentic passage. Hyatt expresses the characteristic view of critical scholarship. "Jeremiah may have favored proper Sabbath observance, but he would surely not have made as much depend upon it as these verses imply." (Hyatt, 1956, pp. 958-959.) On the other hand, although Thompson believes the passage might have been embellished by another writer, he says, "Even though Jeremiah does not appear as a legalist, he must have regarded Sabbath-breaking as a serious offense, and would have been unlikely to exempt Sabbath-keeping from the covenant law. Hence it is altogether likely that Jeremiah made some comments on the keeping of the Sabbath." (Thompson, 1980, pp. 427-428.) The passage is conditional. The people are warned against violations, but are also reminded that if they keep the Sabbath along with other provisions of the Law they will be rewarded by having the throne of David occupied and



the city will be inhabited forever. He concludes with a reiteration of the warning. The emphasis on Sabbath keeping has caused many to date this passage late, either during the exile or post-exilic perhaps during the time of Nehemiah and Ezra. Although the passage has strong legalistic statements which characterized much of post-exilic Judaism, the mention of the temple and the kings do not fit well into that period, but they do fit the pre-exilic period. Nothing in the passage prevents a pre-exilic dating.

Verses 19-20 tell us that Jeremiah was to go to a certain gate of the city which was used by the kings and people. He was to make his proclamation there then move to other gates and do the same. However, we do not know the exact identification of any of these gates. The RSV and a few other translations say "Benjamin's gate." This is based on a textual variant, but most Old Testament textual scholars consider the variant reading to be weak and they generally prefer the reading, "the people's gate." The prophet's message began with a warning about carrying a load on the Sabbath day which was probably based on the injunctions in Ex. 20:8-11, and Deut. 5:12-15. Also see Neh. 13:15-21. In later Judaism the prohibition against work and carrying a load on the Sabbath gave rise to numerous definitions of "work" and "load." These definitions remain an important part of Orthodox Judaism today.

In verse 24 the blessings promised are introduced by the conditional clause, "if you are careful to obey me." This is followed by three injunctions. First, that they carry no load on the Sabbath, second that they respect the holy character of the Sabbath, and third they were to do no work on the Sabbath. Three blessings would then accrue to them. First, the throne of David would be continually occupied and the chariots and horses will come through the gates, second, the city of Jerusalem would be inhabited forever and enjoy the prestige God had always intended, and third that the religious ordinances would be secure. He concludes this pericope by stating that disobedience will bring the curses of the covenant – "I will kindle an unquenchable fire on the gates of Jerusalem that will consume her fortresses." (17:27)

### **Jeremiah at the potter's house. 18:1-17**

In verses 1-10 the prophet describes the potter and clay along with its application to the nation of Israel and other nations. The image of the potter and clay would have been very familiar to just about any nation of the Middle East. The potter's wheel assembly usually consisted of two wheels. There was a lower wheel used by the potter to turn the mechanism with his feet and an upper wheel on which the clay was placed. As the wheels were turned the wet hands of the potter shaped the vessel as the potter desired. Sometimes the clay would be marred, and the potter would remake it as he desired.

This passage is frequently used to defend predestination. Those apologists say that the potter (God) forms each lump of clay (each human being) into whatever he desires. Some are for honor and others for dishonor as Paul says in Rom. 9:19-21. Some were marred and they were remade into vessels which pleased the potter. So the argument goes that the clay (every human being) is entirely in the hands of the potter (God) and he makes it into whatever kind of vessel he wants. Therefore some people are predestined to eternal life and others are predestined to eternal destruction. The potter (God) is the one who determines this.

The fault of this reasoning is that Jeremiah's message speaks of the nation of Israel and God's desire that the nation be one of holiness to fulfill his purposes. The prophet shows that God works in the history of nations, and he may raise one nation up while he declares the demise or fall of another. This is also stated in Daniel's encounter with Nebuchadnezzar as God declares that "the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes." Dan. 4:24-26. In the book of Jonah we have the story of the prophet going to Nineveh to declare its destruction in forty days. Since the people repented God changed his mind and did not bring on them the destruction of which he had warned, Jonah 3:6-10. Jeremiah shows how the story of the potter applies to the nations of the world. "If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it." Jer. 18:7-10.

It is sometimes difficult for us to confront the fact that God works in the affairs of nations. Since he does not always work according to our own desires or our own time schedule or in ways we would like for him to work, we sometime refuse to accept his sovereignty over the nations of the world. Nevertheless he works in these affairs. Habakkuk had the same problem, and God effectively answered him.

Paul's use of the idea of the potter in Rom. 9:19-21 is also thought by some to support predestination. We must remember that Paul is continuing to address the Jew-Gentile controversy, and he uses this figure of speech to show that God always intended to bring the Gentiles into the covenant. Jewish Christians objected to this, and Paul says that they had no right to object to God's intent to save the Gentiles in exactly the same way as he saves the Jews. This is the meaning of the rhetorical question, "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" Paul is speaking against the elitist attitude of the Jewish nation as they raised their objection about the conversion of the Gentiles.

Rather than attempting to assign a specific action of God to every detail of Jeremiah's story of the potter and the clay it is best that we consider only the application made by God himself. In his own words, the Lord makes this application: "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?" declares the Lord. 'Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.'" God is mourning over the unwillingness of the Israelites to yield themselves to the hand of God. This is clearly seen in Jeremiah's constant appeal to the people to repent.

R.K. Harrison expresses a view which borders on predestination. "Jeremiah was impressed by the control which the potter exercised over the clay. Whatever the reasons for dissatisfaction, he took the material and worked on it until it met his specifications. In the same way God has absolute control over his people, and will dispose their destiny according to his purposes (cf. Rom. 9:19ff.)" Notice the expression Harrison uses, "absolute control over his people." (Harrison, 1973, on CD.) This fails to recognize the conditions laid down by the Lord concerning the conduct of the nations. These conditional statements say, "If the nation I warned repents of its evil . . ." (Jer. 18:7-8) Regarding the nation the Lord is going to bless he gives the condition, "If it does evil in my sight and does not obey me . . ." (Jer. 18:9-10) These conditions necessitate free

will on the part of nations or individuals. It is God's intention to bless those who obey, but the decision to obey or disobey always lies with the nation or the individual.

On the other hand, Craigie, *et al.* comment on this principle in this way:

The interpretation of the scene at the potter's house is now given in terms of two general principles set forth as possibilities. The context suggests a conditional sentence structure. If God proposes evil for a nation because of its evil ways and that nation turns from its evil, then God will turn from the evil he had proposed. The reverse is also true: if God proposes good for a nation because of its good ways and that nation turns from its good ways, then God will turn from the good he had planned to do. The principle is simply the working out of covenant stipulations. Treaties and covenants regularly included conditions of the covenant. For the keeping of covenant, the Lord promises blessings on the vassal; but for breaking covenant, the Lord promises punishment for the vassal. What was true in the political arena was also true for God and his relationship with his creation. The closest biblical parallel to a working out of this principle is the case of the Ninevites in the Book of Jonah.

(Craigie, *et al* 1991, on CD.)

Verses 11-17 continue this idea as Jeremiah communicates God's message to the people. God is preparing a disaster for their disobedience. Although the appeal is issued for them to repent, they stubbornly refuse saying, "We will continue with our own plans; each of us will follow the stubbornness of his evil heart." (18:12) This is the logical conclusion to verses 1-10.

In verses 13-17 the prophet speaks of the unnatural apostasy of Israel. It is beyond understanding that Israel would commit the sins of idolatry. The snow always falls naturally on the high peaks of the mountains of Lebanon, and the cool waters continue to flow as a result. All of this so natural, reasonable, and logical, yet Israel offers incense to dumb idols which can produce nothing and only lead them to stumble and go into bypaths and roads which are not built up. In light of all of the blessings God has brought, it makes no sense that the people should depart from the Lord. All of this is unnatural and illogical. The consequences will be the land will be laid waste and become a scorn. All who pass that way will be appalled. The people will be scattered before their enemies and will not see the face of the Lord.

Thompson says that textual scholars have shown that verse 14 has textual problems and an exact translation is not possible. However, in spite of this the message is clear and unchanged. (Thompson, 1980, pp. 437-438.) The land in the history and culture of Israel had a special meaning and significance. It was the fulfillment of the Lord's promises dating back to the time of the exodus from Egypt. Over and over God's promises were linked to the land as their national inheritance. The scorn of the land was that it would become a wasteland and this idea was certainly understood as a severe condemnation from the prophet. Thompson gives a colorful description of this situation. "Travelers passing by would shake their heads in astonishment at the people of Israel for their stupidity in forsaking God Yahweh and the old covenantal paths for the worship of other gods, which were, in any case, fraudulent and nonexistent." (Thompson, 1980 p. 438.) The prophet speaks of the east wind, the sirocco coming down upon Israel to scatter its people. No doubt this fierce wind from the east refers to the Babylonian armies which invaded

Judah and destroyed many of its cities in 587 B.C.

### **The second threat against Jeremiah and his response to the Lord. 18:18-23**

Verse 18 introduces another of Jeremiah's confessions or laments. His constant attacks on the religious leaders were the apparent reasons for their opposition because he was undermining their authority and prestige. The people rejected Jeremiah because they believed the false prophets and priests who were predicting peace and prosperity. Since Jeremiah claimed to speak for the Lord he was probably considered by some to be a blasphemer, and therefore had to be put away. Those who opposed him consisted of three groups and were probably considered the religious establishment of their day. They were the priests who gave the law (Torah, teaching), the prophets who were supposedly delivering the word of God, and the wise men who gave their counsel. Prior to this Jeremiah has frequently mentioned the prophets and priests, and he constantly spoke against their false testimony but no "wise men" were mentioned. Here we are introduced to this additional group of religious leaders. Those who opposed Jeremiah said that the law (Torah, teaching) from the priests would not be lost nor would the word of the prophets or the counsel of the wise. The prophets and priests had constantly assured the people that peace would come and there was no danger of invasion but Jeremiah's message to the contrary was a threat to their position.

Those who opposed Jeremiah thought that the solution was to silence him by speaking slanderous words against him. They said, "let us attack him with our tongues and pay no attention to anything he says." (18:18) This can also be understood as bringing a case against him in a court of law. Jeremiah's prayer for vengeance is very severe, causing some commentators to conclude that it could not have come from Jeremiah himself. However we cannot discount it on that basis, but we must remember the many threats suffered by the prophet, and this was a natural response. Some of the psalms also reflect similar sentiments, *e.g.* Ps. 137:8. In addition however the prophet is so closely identified with the Lord and his cause that any such threat against the prophet personally or their sins against the Lord was seen by Jeremiah to be absolutely appalling and almost unpardonable

He begins this confession or lament by appealing to the Lord to hear him. This is followed by a rhetorical question: "Should good be repaid with evil?" reminding the Lord that he has not only stood up for righteousness but he had even stood before him to plead for the welfare of his enemies. Those who were opposing him had dug a pit (grave?) for him, no doubt referring to their intent to kill him.

In 18:19-23 he seems to see that there is no possibility that the people will repent. Therefore he asks the Lord to do a number of things to punish them, each of which has a vengeful note. There are poetic duplications in some of these. First he asks the Lord to give their children over to famine and hand them over to the power of the sword. Second, he asks that their wives become childless and widows. Third he asks that the men be put to death and the young men be slain in battle. Fourth, when the invaders come let them invade the houses and make the people mourn. Fifth he asks that their crimes and their sins not be forgiven. Sixth he asks that they be overthrown, and seventh he asks the Lord to deal with them in a time of his anger. Although all of this could be seen as personal vengeance, we might also remember that Jeremiah's anger

stemmed from the people's total rejection of the Lord and he considered their stubbornness to be so severe that God could never forgive them. There is no recorded reply from the Lord.

### **The symbolism of the broken jar. 19:1-13**

This passage might also include the text down to 20:6 but those additional verses will be dealt with separately. On a number of occasions the Lord instructed the prophet to go somewhere or to do something which became a symbolic action for an oracle. This approach to revelation of an oracle is also seen in other prophetic books. We can summarize the passage in this manner. Jeremiah was instructed to go buy a jar, call the priests and the elders of the people together as witnesses, and go to the Valley of Ben-Hinnom. There he was to proclaim God's word that the place would be destroyed. After this he was to break the jar so that it could not be repaired and show that this symbolic gesture demonstrates the coming destruction of Israel. He was then to go to the court of the temple where he again prophesied.

In verses 1-2 Jeremiah is told to go purchase a clay jar and go to the Valley of Ben-Hinnom. The clay jar was probably a commonly used water jar many of which have been uncovered by archaeologists. Generally they ranged from six inches to one foot (15-30 cm.) with a narrow neck. Most commentators say that the Valley of Ben-Hinnom was probably located on the southern extremity of Jerusalem. In the New Testament Gehenna is generally identified as the Valley of Ben-Hinnom. It was notorious for its pagan cults and pagan practices. (See Craigie, *et al.*, 1991, on CD.)

During a portion of the period of the divided kingdom this had been the location of a large statue of Molech and the center of Molech worship. Infant sacrifices had taken place there, and Jeremiah also mentions such sacrifices to Baal (Jer. 19:5). Much of this was destroyed during the religious reforms of Josiah, II Kgs. 23:10-11. Jeremiah's activity was to take place near the Potsherd Gate. This is the only mention of this gate in the Bible, but the Jerusalem Targum (an Aramaic translation of portions of the Old Testament) identifies it as the Dung Gate mentioned in Neh. 3:13-14 and 12:31. The name "Potsherd" has caused some to conclude that it was the entrance to an area where potters had their shops, and their broken pots were discarded here. However Kenneth Clark of Duke University disagrees saying that there is no real evidence for this conclusion. (Clark, 1962, pp. 73-74.) The Valley of Ben-Hinnom later became a garbage dump.

Verses 3-9 give the essence of Jeremiah's message from God. First he introduces it with the statement, "Hear the word of the Lord, O kings of Judah and people of Jerusalem." It is interesting that he uses the plural when speaking of the "kings of Judah." In verse 4 he speaks of the "blood of the innocent" being shed in the Valley of Hinnom, without doubt referring to the infants who were sacrificed to the heathen gods Baal and Molech. Such human sacrifices were often practiced among the ancients, especially by the Canaanites and the Phoenicians. In 7:31 and 19:6 Jeremiah mentions the place of Topheth in the Valley of Hinnom. This was a location in the Valley where many of the human sacrifices were offered and there was a high place there also. The word originally meant a "fireplace or hearth" and some extra biblical writings say that this was in that place that the human sacrifices were burned.

In verses 3-9 Jeremiah lists some of the evils of his countrymen and warns them of God's wrath to come on the land. The people will fall by the sword, their carcasses will become food for the birds and the wild beasts, the cities will be devastated and become scornful, and the inhabitants will become cannibalistic and eat their own children and the flesh of others. As horrible as this is, it was not unknown among the Israelites. See II Kgs. 6:26-29. The devastation will be so great and so many will die that the valley will become known, not as the Valley of Ben Hinnom but as the Valley of Slaughter (19:6, 11).

In verses 10-12 Jeremiah is told to break the jar while the witnesses are watching and say to the people, "This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'I will smash this nation and this city just as this potter's jar is smashed and cannot be repaired. They will bury the dead in Topheth until there is no more room.'" Some commentators believe that Jeremiah was engaging in a magical rite similar to that which was practiced in some Middle Eastern pagan cults. For example, the Egyptians would write the names of their enemies on a clay jar, and ritually crash the jar, believing that this would set in motion divine intervention which would ultimately bring them victory over their enemies. There is no reason however to suppose that the prophet is engaging in this sort of superstitious gesture, especially since he had opposed pagan practices so vigorously. This was simply a symbolic act of the same type as many other symbolic acts of the prophets. The crushing of the jar was symbolic of the demise of Judah. As it could not be put back together, so the nation of Israel would not survive undamaged. "This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'I will smash this nation and this city just as this potter's jar is smashed and cannot be repaired. They will bury the dead in Topheth until there is no more room.'" (Jer. 19:11)

In verse 13 he says that the city of Jerusalem and the villages around it would be defiled by the dead bodies left lying outside. There was no place left to bury them. See Num. 19:11-16 concerning ceremonial cleanliness and dead bodies. The city would be burned to the ground. In addition to the defilement caused by the dead bodies Jeremiah speaks of those who practice the pagan custom of offering incense and drink offerings (libations) to the astral gods of the Mesopotamians (the starry host). The flat roofs of the ancient houses made this an ideal place for those activities. Also see Deut. 4:19, Jer. 7:16-19, 32:26-29, and Zeph. 1:5. The goddess Ashtaroth was especially important in these rituals. The accidental discovery of the Ras Shamrah (Ugaritic) texts in 1928 gave archaeologists a great deal of information on this practice. These texts were first discovered by a Syrian peasant who plowed up a flagstone which covered a subterranean passageway leading to a tomb in which the texts were found. This discovery yielded a trove of information on many Middle Eastern pagan practices and other data, and is considered one of the major archaeological discoveries of the twentieth century.

Verses 14-15 speak of Jeremiah's return from Topheth to the temple where he delivered his message of doom.

### **Pashhur and the imprisonment of Jeremiah. 20:1-6**

Pashhur, the son of Immer the chief officer of the temple, heard Jeremiah and had him arrested. There is strong evidence of a syncretistic practice of religion all through Jeremiah. In fact, this is found during most of the divided kingdom period. The people held to some of the vestiges of their belief in the Lord, offered sacrifices to God, and observed other religious rituals of the Law.

However this was mixed with their pagan practices, and the Lord came to be thought of as just another god in their pantheon. Many of the prophets spoke strongly against this, and it is certainly seen in a variety of places in Jeremiah. Pashhur was a priest in the temple, but Jeremiah also accused him of false testimony. The fact that he is called the chief officer of the temple probably means that it was his responsibility to maintain order in the temple area. Jeremiah was seen as a troublemaker, and this may have been the pretense for his arrest. In 1:5, Jeremiah's call to his ministry, the Lord appoints him as "prophet to the nations." Thompson makes an interesting observation here. "There is intense irony in that the overseer in God's temple is now about to take action against God's overseer" (Thompson, 1980, p. 54). There are two men in the book of Jeremiah who are named Pashhur. One is here, and the other is Pashhur the son of Malkijah (38:1). It is possible that the Pashhur we have here in 20:1ff is the father of Gedaliah, but this is not definite.

In verses 1-2 we have the account of the confrontation between Jeremiah and Pashhur. It is significant, not only in reference to the experiences of the prophet himself but also in the specificity of the brief prophecy spoken. Pashhur has the prophet flogged and put in stocks. This was probably a recognized treatment of those who caused disturbance in the temple area. Jeremiah is frequently seen simply as a troublemaker as were many of the prophets. Their fortitude brought them constant opposition. For example see this in reference to Elijah in I Kgs. 16:16-18 and Amos in Am. 7:10-13.

Verses 3-6 tell of the release of the prophet from prison. Jeremiah immediately spoke to Pashhur about his own condemnation. First the prophet said God's name for him was not Pashhur but Magor-Missabib which means "terror all around." Jeremiah's explanation shows that this was a divine curse on Pashhur. In his position Pashhur had meted out punishment to others, but soon he and his household along with his allies would receive divine punishment.

In verse 4 the prophet identifies the ones who will invade and destroy Jerusalem. In earlier chapters the expression "the enemy from the north," or some such saying has been used frequently but now for the first time in the book that foe is identified as Babylon. Babylon continues to be mentioned about thirty-five additional times through the remainder of the book and the enemy from the north occurs about fifteen additional times.

In verse 5 Jeremiah specifies the types of booty which the Babylonians will take. They will take all of the wealth of the city, all of its products, all of its valuables, and all of the treasures of the kings of Judah. Verse 6 tells of the fate of Pashhur, his household, and his allies. He will see his friends fall by the sword, and all Judah will be handed over to the king of Babylon who will carry them away or kill them. Pashhur and his entire household will be taken to Babylon as exiles and they will die and be buried there. The reason for this was that he had prophesied lies. For an Israelite to be buried outside of his homeland was considered a very sad fate for a patriotic citizen. Pashhur, as an official of the temple would certainly have considered it so.

### **Jeremiah's inner struggle about his mission – his confession. 20:7-18**

Once again we have a glimpse into the heart of Jeremiah but this time it is more overwhelming than ever. He is honest with himself and with God, a fate which is difficult for any human being

to realistically undertake. We are usually more comfortable living in a state of denial, not willing to face our own hostilities and dissatisfactions with God and equally unwilling to confess them honestly and completely to the Lord. We see that Jeremiah and Elijah have much in common when we look at their experiences, their conflicts, and the unadulterated honesty of both of these prophets.

This confession is a story of conflicting loves. Jeremiah cannot deny the immorality and evil of his nation, nor does he ever try to soften its profound wickedness. However his love for them is deep and meaningful but it only produces equally profound sorrow. His unfathomable love for the Lord is always his overriding guide. His conflicts are as genuine as his sorrows, and his sorrows as genuine as his love. In the midst of this is the compelling force of obligation to speak the word of God boldly, forcefully, and without compromise. In brief, Jeremiah has an unbending love for his nation – his own flesh and blood – which crosses swords with his deeply engrained love and loyalty to the Lord. Out of this agony comes his confession.

James P. Hyatt introduces this confession with these words: “Here we have the bitterest and saddest laments of Jeremiah in all the series of his ‘confessions.’ It is the last of the series and one of the most important for the study of the prophet’s personality especially of his strong sense of divine compulsion to a prophetic career.” (Hyatt, 1956, p. 971.)

This confession should not be seen as arising out of the confrontation the prophet had with Pashhur, but as a much broader introspection of the prophet as he considers the totality of his ministry. His expressions in verses 7-8 make us think of his anger against the Lord accusing God of being deceitful (most English translations). Although the word translated “deceive” can also be translated “persuade” most linguists opt for “deceive” or “entice.” The Hebrew word is also found in Ex. 22:16 where it speaks of a man who “seduces” a virgin. In I Kgs. 22:20-22 it is used to describe the enticing words of the lying spirits which deceived Ahab. It is also used in Jer. 15:18. In the passage under consideration the LXX uses *απαταω* (*apataō*) which means “to divert, to cheat, to deceive, to distract or to seduce.” It is a very strong word. Craigie, *et al.*, along with many other commentators, see it differently however. They say that the context upholds the translation, “persuade.” Jeremiah had objected to his call saying, “I do not know how to speak; I am only a child, (1:6). The Lord “persuaded” the prophet; he overcame Jeremiah’s objections in much the same way that the Lord overcame the objections of Moses (Ex. 3:11-15) and of Isaiah (Is. 6:5-7). (Craigie, *et al.*, 1991, on CD.). Many commentators agree with John Bright’s statement:

One can neither exaggerate the agony of spirit revealed here, nor improve upon the words which Jeremiah found to express it. There is, indeed, little in all of literature that compares with this piece, and nothing in the Bible except perhaps the third chapter of Job, to which it is very similar.

(Bright, 1965, p. 134.)

Every honest person, to one degree or another, lives in a state of contradiction. Sometime we search in vain for answers to many of life’s dilemmas. Logic, reasoning, values, spiritual training, loves and loyalties usually have many conflicts. We are frequently confronted with the



question, “Why has God allowed this (or caused this) to happen?” Jeremiah faced these questions and he accused God of being deceitful. Did the prophet misunderstand his prophetic call? (Jer. 1:4-11) Jeremiah constantly faced the opposite of what some might expect as he proclaimed God’s word. After all, he had been “set apart” by the Lord, appointed as “a prophet to the nations,” one to whom God had said, “I will rescue you,” a prophet whose mouth had been touched by the Lord and who was to receive and deliver the very words of the Lord, one to whom the Lord had said, “I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.” But life for this prophet turned out to be quite miserable, extremely disappointing, and filled with almost unbearable burdens. These may have been some of the things which passed through Jeremiah’s mind as he wrote verses 7-8 of our text because he was not able to build and plant or to uproot and tear down except as these things worked against his own people. Instead he experienced insult and reproach, threats and terror on every side, persecutions and revenge from the people he was trying to help. See 20:8-10.

Verse 9 is injected to show the intensity of Jeremiah’s sense of mission in his ministry for the Lord. He could stop, but there is a fire of zeal in his heart and a fire in his bones. His work is not a job or a profession, but a true calling from the Lord. Indeed, the Lord’s ministry, both then and now must be seen as a calling, not a profession. We must not think of this call as a mysterious “tap on the shoulder” or dream or vision, but the inescapable urge to take the message of God to the people. There is neither exit nor retreat for such a one. Seldom is the message popular and frequent are the insecurities. In verse 10 Jeremiah’s adversaries use a bit of sarcasm regarding the name “Magor-Missabib” (“terror on every side”) to describe their own scheming against the prophet of God. That was the new name which God gave to Pashhur after Jeremiah’s release from prison. His antagonists say that perhaps a slip of the tongue will give them opportunity for revenge.

Verse 11 however, expresses some optimism in Jeremiah’s mind. Some commentators have considered this unauthentic because it comes in the midst of a very emotional inner conflict which the prophet is expressing. Here he says that the Lord will be with him as a mighty warrior. His persecutors will stumble and not prevail, they will fall and be disgraced, and their dishonor will never be forgotten. This should be seen as an integral part of the conflict with which the prophet is dealing. It fits perfectly into that context. In verse 12 he extols the Lord Almighty, asking that vengeance be brought on the violators of the covenant and restating his own commitment to the cause of righteousness.

Verse 13 is a sort of isolated doxology. Some commentators have rejected its authenticity because its mood is so different from the frustrations and disappointments which Jeremiah expressed previously. However, many of the lament psalms conclude with this type of doxology or thanksgiving. Having expressed his despair as well as his hope, his frustrations as well as his trust he pauses to praise God who rescues the life of the needy from the hands of the wicked. No doubt he uses the word “needy” in a broader sense than just those who live in poverty.

In 14-18 Jeremiah returns to his personal reflections of frustration. He begins (vss. 14-15) with the same thought as Job when he curses the day of his birth. See Job 3:1-10. He says, “Cursed be the man who brought my father the news,” and “May that man be like the towns the Lord overthrew without pity,” probably referring to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen.

19). He asks why he did not die in the womb instead of having to live a life of sorrow and end his days in shame. Such expressions as these are not so much an expression of hatred against those who brought the news of his birth to others, but a literary-poetic license frequently used to express the deepest grief, suffering, and despair. These feelings, though not as strongly expressed, were spoken poetically and literally by Jeremiah in earlier sections of the book. It is to be noticed that Jeremiah did not curse God for his birth, and he did not curse either his father or mother. Unlike the complaint in 15:19, the Lord does not answer the prophet.

## **Chapter VII**

### **Evil Kings and False Prophets**

#### **21:1—23:40**

#### **Introduction**

In this block we have a collection of items from different time periods, but there is a single theme which loosely connects them – the denunciation of certain specific kings, the denunciation of the monarchy in general, and the denunciation of the false prophets which were in constant opposition to Jeremiah. Our prophet contrasts Judah’s evil monarchy with the righteous branch, a king of God’s own choosing, who will be a just and righteous shepherd for his people.

#### **Zedekiah’s inquiry and Jeremiah’s reply. 21:1-10**

Nebuchadnezzar ruled the Babylonian Empire from 605-562 B.C. The events of this section took place about 589-588 B.C. Shortly after the siege of Jerusalem had begun, it was lifted while the Babylonians pursued the Egyptians who were trying to come to the aid of Judah. The Egyptians retreated, and the siege of Jerusalem was resumed. The city fell in 586 B.C. See Jer. 37:1-8, II Kgs. 24:18—25:26 and II Chron. 23:11-21 for the historical account of the fall of Jerusalem. As we attempt to merge the accounts in II Kgs. 23:31—25:12 and II Chron. 36:1-21 the succession of kings of Judah and the various invasions by the Egyptians and subsequently by the Babylonians become confusing. These invasions took place between 609 B.C. (the time of Jehoahaz) and 586 B.C. (the year of the fall of Jerusalem). See the Chapter I, “Introduction to Jeremiah” for more details. Briefly the following chronological succession gives us the picture of these events.

1. 609 B.C. Jehoahaz, son of Josiah became king. He reigned three months and was de-throned by Pharaoh Neco who took him down to Egypt. Neco then imposed a levy on Judah of one hundred talents of silver and a talent of gold. II Kgs. 23:31-33, II Chron. 36:1-3.
2. 609 B.C.-598 B.C. Pharaoh Neco made Eliakim, also a son of Josiah, king of Judah and changes his name to Jehoiakim. He reigned for eleven years, 609 B.C. – 598 B.C. II Kgs. 23:34-35, II Chron. 36:5.
3. 602 B.C. (the approximate year). Nebuchadnezzar invaded Judah and Jehoiakim became a vassal of Babylon. After 3 years (II Kgs. 24:1, 598 B.C.) Jehoiakim rebelled and the Babylonians invaded Judah again, taking Jehoiakim back to Babylon as a prisoner. Chronologists believe that this took place about 598 B.C. See II Kgs. 23:36—24:7 and II Chron. 36:6-7.
4. 598 B.C. Jehoiachin, son of Jehoiakim became king. The Babylonians invaded again (II Kgs. 24:6-16 and II Chron. 36:8-10) and Jehoiachin was taken prisoner and carried to Babylon. He had ruled only three months and ten days. Nebuchadnezzar took a great deal of gold out of the temple and carried thousands of military officers, fighting men, ar-

tisans and craftsmen to Babylon as captives. This took place during the eighth year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign as king of Babylon making it about 598/597 B.C. See II Kgs. 24:9-17 and II Chron., 36:9-10.

5. 597 B.C.-586 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar made Jehoiachin's uncle, Mattaniah, king of Judah and changed his name to Zedekiah. This took place about 597 B.C., II Kgs. 24:16-20, II Chron. 36:11-14. Zedekiah reigned for eleven years. About nine years into his reign (588 B.C.) he rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar responded by invading Judah again. Pharaoh Neco attempted to come to the aid of Judah, no doubt hoping to protect his own interests by keeping Babylon as far away as possible. Nebuchadnezzar lifted the siege of Jerusalem long enough to pursue Pharaoh Neco's army and force them to return to Egypt. See Jer. 37:1-7.
6. 588 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar returned to Jerusalem and completed his two year siege of the city (588 B.C.-586 B.C.). II Kgs. 24:19—25:2. The fall of Jerusalem terminated Zedekiah's eleven year reign over Judah.
7. 586 B.C. The fall of Jerusalem. Zedekiah witnessed the execution of his sons, his own eyes were then put out, and he was taken as a prisoner to Babylon (II Kgs. 25:7). The temple and palace were sacked and their valuables were taken to Babylon. Thousands of Jews were deported to Babylon. Only the uneducated, unskilled, and non-productive people were left in the land. Nebuzaradan, the captain of Nebuchadnezzar's imperial guard, was brought to Jerusalem to burn and destroy the city. Nebuchadnezzar appointed Gedaliah as governor of Judah. Some of the Jews escaped and fled to Egypt. See II Kgs. 25:1-26

There are interesting contrasts and similarities between 20:1-2 and 21:1-2. We have two different men named Pashhur. The individual in 20:1-2 is Pashhur the son of Immer while the Pashhur in 21:1 is the son of Malkijah who will appear again in 38:1 as a strong opponent of Jeremiah. In 20:1-2 Jeremiah is humiliated and imprisoned in stock, but in 21:1-2 the prophet is consulted and asked to seek God's intervention during the siege of the city.

There are also similar events described in Jer. 21:1-10 and in 37:1-8. This however, is not a doublet. The situations are somewhat different and some of the characters are different. The events described in 37:1-8 speak of Pharaoh Neco who has come to assist Judah, but no such situation appears in 21:1-10. Zephaniah, the son of Maaseiah appears in three passages, 21:1, 29:25, and 37:3. He lived during the siege of Jerusalem and he is not the prophet Zephaniah the son of Cushi who wrote the book bearing his name.

King Zedekiah's rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar probably came in about 588 B.C. (See II Kgs. 24:18-20 and II Chron. 36:13). In 21:1-2 Nebuchadnezzar's siege of Jerusalem appears to be in its early stages, also about 588 B.C. In our passage in Jeremiah 21 Zedekiah instructed Pashhur and Zephaniah to ask Jeremiah to inquire of the Lord thinking that it might be possible that a wonder could be performed to cause the Babylonians to withdraw. Perhaps he remembered how the Lord had intervened in 701 B.C., when Sennacherib and the Assyrians attacked

the city during the reign of Hezekiah. Through God's intervention at that time the Assyrians withdrew and returned home. See II Kgs. 19:35-36 and Is. 37:36-37.

In 21:3-10 Jeremiah gave Zedekiah the Lord's unwelcome reply. No miraculous wonders desired by Zedekiah will take place. Instead, the Lord will turn against Judah. The Babylonians, who were then outside of the walls, will come inside and the Lord himself will fight against Judah and strike down its men and animals. They will die of a terrible plague.

In verse 4 the Lord makes an interesting statement: "I am about to turn against you the weapons of war that are in your hand that you are using to fight the king of Babylon." This statement and others in this verse are ambiguous, but this ambiguity may add to the force of the passage. Judah's own weapons will be completely ineffective against their invaders, and their own implements of war will become a liability to them. This reinforces the determination of the Lord to punish his people. The "Divine Warrior" is no longer fighting for Judah, but he has turned against the people to punish them. Even their own weapons will become millstones around their necks. Those who survive the plague, sword, and famine, including the king and his officials will be handed over to Nebuchadnezzar. Most English translations use the word "servants" rather than "officials" when speaking of the king and his company. Thompson says that the word "servant" does not capture the force the official character of these people. They are the king's entourage.

In Verses 8-10 a strange "hope" is provided for the people. The fact that a similar statement is found in 38:2-3 may indicate that this was a warning which Jeremiah had made on a number of occasions as he spoke of the impending doom of the city. Those who stay in the city will perish but those who go out of the city and surrender to the Babylonians will survive. The city will be destroyed by fire. The grim reality was simple; slaughter could be avoided by nonresistance and peaceful surrender. God's judgment against the nation was inevitable. God had abandoned his people because of their constant infidelity, immorality, and idolatry. Because Jeremiah made these warnings at various times he was accused of being a traitor.

### **A warning to the king's house and an oracle against Jerusalem. 21:11—22:30**

This block divides itself into a group of smaller sections which deal with specific situations and kings. This first section, 21:11—22:9 is quite general dealing with the basic duties of kings and other officials of the city of Jerusalem. The succeeding sections deal with particular situations and specific kings, some of whom reigned during the ministry of Jeremiah. These include Shallum (Jehoahaz) in 22:10-12, Jehoiakim in 22:13-19, the doom of Jerusalem in 22:20-23, and Jehoiachin (Coniah) in 22:24-30. The name Jehoahaz was a throne name and Shallum was the king's personal name. He was the fourth son of Josiah. See I Chron. 3:15. We will take each as a separate pericope.

### **The duties of the king and an oracle against Jerusalem. 21:11—22:9**

Verse 11 is a transitional verse as the prophet moves from prose to poetry, and this entire section alternates between poetry and prose, each with its warnings. It is primarily addressed to the royal house of David meaning the Davidic dynasty.

Verse 12 admonishes the royal house (the king) to administer justice in the morning. This is a poetic symbolism probably meaning each day; begin the day by defending those who cannot defend themselves. The administration of justice was one of the fundamental duties of a king throughout the Middle East. Solomon's discernment in the story of the two women and their babies (I Kgs. 3:16-28) demonstrates this. However, Israel and Judah had considerable trouble practicing the principle of civil justice to the less fortunate. Many other prophets such as Amos, Isaiah, Micah, and Hosea also issued such warnings and admonitions to Israel and Judah. Jeremiah warns the royal house of its duty to rescue those who have been robbed from the hands of their oppressors. Otherwise God's wrath would break out on them because of the evil they had done. Notice the absolute condemnation which Jeremiah presents followed by his appeal to the people to turn back to justice and other principles of godliness. Since the book is not arranged in chronological order some of these appeals could have come earlier in Jeremiah's ministry.

Verses 13-14 appear as an interruption in the thought begun in verses 11-12 where Jeremiah defines some of the basic functions of the royal house. This thought is continued through 22:1-9. Verses 12-13 form the oracle against Jerusalem with the phrase, "I am against you." Craigie, *et al.* believe that this was a common military "challenge formula" similar to that spoken by David when he met Goliath, "You come against me . . . but I come against you." (Craigie, *et al.*, 1991, on CD.) The Lord is stating that he will come against Judah in the form of an army, no doubt speaking of the Babylonians. This, and similar statements illustrate the fact that God is using the military might of another nation to punish his own people.

In verse 14 Jeremiah refers to an unidentified city but most commentators believe he is speaking of Jerusalem. The NIV inserts the word "Jerusalem" but this is an addition to the translation, considered by the translators to have been a correct inference from the context. However, there are some textual problems here. Those who object to the identification as Jerusalem call attention to the fact that the description of the city does not exactly fit Jerusalem. It speaks of "valley dwellers," but the valleys around Jerusalem (Valley of Ben-Hinnom, Tyropeon Valley, Kidron Valley, etc.) were almost uninhabited. There were no forests in Jerusalem. The NIV translates "inhabitants of the valley" as "you who live above the valley." The various descriptions of the valleys, forest, etc. are thought to be figures of speech describing a luxurious city which considers itself completely secure and has nothing to fear. Some believe there may be a play on words here referring to the pagan sacrifices in the Hinnom Valley. In the mid third century B.C. some thought this was referring to the city of Tyre but the evidence for this identification is very weak and does not fit the broader context.

The message is the Lord's condemnation of the arrogance of the city in believing that nothing catastrophic could happen to them. In 21:13 the rhetorical question, "Who can come against us, who can enter our refuge?" receives the Lord's response, "I will punish you as your deeds deserve declares the Lord. I will kindle a fire in your forests that will consume everything around you," 21:14. This statement also lends itself to the identification of the city of Jerusalem because it was the main city of Judah, and it is frequently addressed as symbolic of the nation as a whole.

The next pericope, 22:1-9 is introduced with a standard formula (22:1-2), "This is what the Lord says." After Jeremiah is instructed to go to the king's palace (house) he is instructed to address the king of Judah, his officials, and the people who come through the gates. Verse 3 contains

much the same information as previously seen in 21:12. A ray of hope is offered if they obey those commands, stating that kings who sit on David's throne will come through the gates victoriously riding their horses and driving their chariots, accompanied by the officials and their people. This is a promise of the continuation of the Davidic dynasty and the safety of the nation if they obey the Lord. The prophet follows this with a warning that if they fail to obey the city will be left in ruins (22:5).

Taken together verses 21:11—22:19 make a brief statement of the duties of the kings and those of the royal house. The message is not new. The problems of oppression of the poor and the underprivileged, the denial of justice to those who had little status, the neglect of the widows and the fatherless, dishonest business practices, corrupt practices against aliens in their borders, etc. were addressed by the eighth century prophets. Ethical and social responsibilities were parts of the covenant. See Ex. 22:21-26, 23:1-9, Lev. 19:3-37. However, the people were always prone to attribute the downfall of the nation, losses of all kinds, and economic woes to causes other than their own corrupt, immoral, and unethical practices.

Verses 6-7 give a vivid image of the Lord's exhortation and warning. The palace and the king's throne were as dear to the Lord as Gilead and the summit of Lebanon. However, the refusal of the people to obey God will result in the palaces becoming like a desert and the towns will be uninhabited. The destroyer will cut up their cedar beams and throw them into the fire.

Verses 8-9 return to prose and they picture the nations passing by the city asking, "Why has the Lord done such a thing to this great city?" The answer is that the people forsook the covenant and worshipped other gods and served them. The phrase "worshipped other gods" can also be translated "bowed down to other gods." This pictures a vassal king prostrating himself before his conqueror. The symbolism shows how Judah has submitted to other gods.

### **Oracle against Jehoahaz (Shallum) 22:10-12**

Jeremiah tells the people not to mourn over the dead king, no doubt referring to Josiah the father of Jehoahaz. Josiah had died at Megiddo in the battle against Pharaoh Neco. We need to pause briefly here and review the history of that event.

Nineveh had fallen in 612 B.C., bringing the Assyrian Empire to its practical end. However some of the armies of Assyria fled to Haran in Syria under the leadership of Ashur-uballit who attempted to revive the power of Assyria. According to the Babylonian Chronicle the following events took place in 609 B.C. The Babylonians, who had destroyed Nineveh, were placing Ashur-uballit under great pressure and also threatened the Egyptian holdings in the area of Carchemish, Syria. Pharaoh Neco was rushing to Carchemish to protect Egypt's interests there and to assist the Assyrian remnant in their fight against the Chaldeans. As Neco led his army northward through Palestine Josiah, king of Judah, opposed him at Megiddo. Josiah was wounded in the encounter and he was taken back to Jerusalem where he died, II Kgs. 23:26-30 and II Chron. 35:22-25. In 605 B.C. at the Battle of Carchemish Pharaoh Neco's army was completely defeated by the Chaldeans but Neco retained some control over portions of Syria and Palestine. Jehoahaz, Josiah's son became king of Judah, but he had ruled only three months when Neco deposed him and took him to Egypt as a prisoner where he later died. His brother Eliakim was

made king in his stead and Neco changed his name to Jehoiakim. See II Kgs.23:31-35 and II Chron. 36:1-4.

With this historical note in mind, verse 10 tells the people not to weep over the dead king (Josiah), but weep over the one who has gone into exile (Shallum – Jehoahaz) because he will never return to his land. Some commentators (Craigie, *et al.*) believe that verse 10 stands alone but it is generally thought that the context links verses 10-12. In these verses the fate of Shallum seems to carry a veiled reference or symbolism to the future fate of Judah. As Jehoahaz was taken to Egypt as an exile so the people of Judah would go to Babylon as exiles. This is what they should be mourning over.

### **Oracle concerning Jehoiakim. 22:13-19**

This oracle does not identify Jehoiakim until verse 18, but there can be no doubt that the entire pericope is speaking of him since verse 18 begins with the word, “Therefore.” The Babylonian Chronicle shows that during this time there was a great deal of military competition between Babylon and Egypt, and a number of battles were fought between those two powers. There can be no doubt that the people of Judah were divided in their thoughts about which nation would finally win this competition. The Chronicle shows that Egypt was able in some cases to fend off the attacks of Nebuchadnezzar although the Scripture accounts do not describe those battles. Jeremiah warns the people not to go to Egypt but some of them finally chose to cast their lot with the Egyptians, taking Jeremiah with them. See Jer. 43:1-8.

In verse 13 Jeremiah begins this pericope with the ominous statement, “Woe to the one who builds his palace by unrighteousness.” At this point the reader does not know of whom the prophet is speaking or if “house” refers to the royal palace, a family home, or something else. Perhaps the ambiguity is purposeful. As he progresses it becomes more and more evident that luxury is in the mind of the prophet, and he will contrast this with compassion after he has identified Jehoiakim. By referring to a king, he removes some of the ambiguity, but still he could be referring to wealthy people living in luxury.

In verses 15-17 he changes from using the third personal pronoun “he” to the second personal pronoun “you” in speaking of his subject. This makes Jeremiah’s address more direct, and in verse 18 the prophet identifies Jehoiakim as the subject. Jeremiah has attacked the luxurious palace built by the king and his refusal to pay the laborers for their work. This was in defiance of the provisions of the Law of Moses, Lev. 19:13, Deut. 24:14ff. The palace is described as one with spacious upper rooms with large windows, and panels of cedar. But he asks the rhetorical question, “Does it make you a king to have more and more cedar?” (22:15) His luxury was built on unrighteousness and injustice. Jeremiah contrasts this with Josiah’s reign of moderation, justice, and righteousness. Jehoiakim’s father defended the cause of the poor and exercised restraint in his lifestyle. The results were good. Knowing God is characterized by the demonstration of compassion and spiritual qualities, not by the ostentation of wealth or power, 22:16b. However Jehoiakim, in contrast with his father, was set on dishonest gain, shedding innocent blood, extortion and oppression. The condemnation concludes with the stern denunciation that no one will mourn over him when he dies and he will have the burial of a donkey, not that of a



king. He will be dragged outside the city of Jerusalem and thrown away. There will be no splendor.

The accounts in II Kgs 24:1-7 and II Chron. 36:5-8 need to be taken in conjunction with these statements in Jer. 22:18-19. The account in II Kings says that Jehoiakim “slept with his fathers” which ordinarily would be taken as a normal royal burial, certainly not that of a donkey cast out of the city. The account in II Chronicles states that Nebuchadnezzar “attacked him and bound him with bronze shackles to take him to Babylon” although it does not actually say that he was taken there. Some have speculated that he may have been assassinated when the Babylonians invaded Jerusalem about 602 B.C. while Jehoiakim was king.

### **The coming doom of Jerusalem. 22:20-23**

Grammatically these verses use the feminine gender and commentators generally agree that the prophet addresses a woman who personifies the city of Jerusalem. This literary device is used frequently by Old Testament poets. The inhabitants of the city are told to go north to Lebanon and northeast to Bashan in Transjordan and then southeast to Abarim, a mountain range in Moab. The mountain range of Abarim is the location of Mt. Nebo from which Moses viewed the Promised Land (Deut. 32:49). In these places she (Jerusalem) is to cry out because all of her lovers (political and military allies) have been crushed. The NIV and a few other English versions translate this phrase, “all your allies are crushed.” The word “lovers” is frequently used to describe evil allies of the people or the nation.

The city of Jerusalem felt very secure. Many times the Lord had spoken to arrogant Jerusalem but her people would not listen. Unfortunately this was not something new; they had been rebellious from their youth (vs. 21). The Lord told them that the day was coming when their shepherds (leaders) would be driven away by the winds and their evil lovers (political and military allies) would go into exile. Jerusalem’s evil will cause her to be disgraced and ashamed. Some commentators believe that the phrase “You who live in Lebanon” is symbolically referring to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Fine cedar, stone, and other building materials are known to have come from Lebanon and some believe that these expensive materials are emblematic of Jerusalem’s luxury. Solomon used many of these materials in his building projects. The proud dwellers of Lebanon (Jerusalem) who live in those cedar houses will groan like a woman in labor (vs. 23).

### **Oracle concerning Jehoiachin. 22:24-30**

Commentators are divided as to whether verses 24-27 are poetry or prose. The passage has some of the characteristic of both types of literature as the writer describes the fate of king Jehoiachin. Thompson believes that verses 24-27 were probably uttered just prior to the Babylonian invasion when Jehoiachin was deposed and deported, but that verses 28-30 came after that deportation.

Jehoiachin was only eighteen years old when he came to the throne succeeding his father Jehoiakim. This was about 598-597 B.C. After reigning only three months and ten days (II Chron. 36:9), the Babylonians invaded Judah and took King Jehoiachin, his wives, his mother, many others in the royal family and some governmental officials back to Babylon. “He carried into

exile all Jerusalem; all the officers and fighting men and all the craftsmen and artisans – a total of ten thousand. Only the poorest people of the land were left,” II Kgs. 24:14. Nebuchadnezzar also took many of the treasures of the temple back to Babylon. This was a prelude to the complete destruction of the city which, according to the Babylonian Chronicle, took place March 16, 597 B.C. Refer to the chronological data given earlier in this chapter. Mattaniah, Jehoiachin’s uncle, was made king and his name was changed to Zedekiah.

Although 22:24 in the NIV reads “Jehoiachin, son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah,” the name Coniah is a correct translation rather than Jehoiachin, and it is found in almost all other translations. Coniah was the shortened form of Jeconiah which Bright says was the personal name of the king. (Bright, 1965, p. 142.) This name Jehoiachin also occurs in the NIV in I Chron. 3:16. Refer to the footnote in the NIV which clarifies this. The name Jehoiachin became his throne name.

In this block, 22:24-30, the Lord’s message to Jehoiachin has five distinct statements. First, even if Jehoiachin were the Lord’s signet ring, he would be thrown off. Second, he will be handed over to those who seek his life. Third, he and his mother will be hurled into another country where neither of them was born. The word “hurl” is the same word which is frequently used to refer to the throwing of a javelin or spear. Fourth, they will die in that foreign land and never return to their native country. Fifth, he will be recorded as if childless because none of his offspring will sit on the throne of David.

The kings of Judah, those who sat on the throne of David, were considered the representatives of the Lord, and seen as God’s signet ring, or his seal. In the ancient Middle East the marking of property and documents with a seal (from the signet ring) was an honored and legal custom with official sanction. The Lord tells Jehoiachin that he has lost all of the status of an official or representative of God. In this oracle the Lord says he will cast off Jehoiachin and he will turn him over to Nebuchadnezzar who seeks his life. Nebuchadnezzar will take Jehoiachin and the captives to a strange land, far away from the Promised Land, and there he will die. He was imprisoned in Babylon, but upon the death of Nebuchadnezzar and the accession of his son, Amel-Marduk (Evil-Meradoc), Jehoiachin was released but he had to remain in Babylon where he died. Among ancient Middle Easterners, especially the Israelites, to die and be buried in a foreign land was a terrible thought. Thompson observes, “A land needs a people and a people needs a land. Little wonder that Jeremiah referred to the desperate yearning . . . to return. But there would be no return. They would die there.” (Thompson, 1980, pp. 483-484.)

In verse 28 he continues his description of the predicament of Jehoiachin asking “Is this man Jehoiachin a despised broken pot, an object no one wants?” This is supposedly a rhetorical question with an obvious answer, but commentators are divided concerning just what the answer might be. It is generally thought that the answer is “Yes, he is such a broken piece of pottery.” That is, he could have performed a needed service as an unbroken piece of pottery would perform but the fact that he is broken means that he is useless, “an object which no one wants,” Jer. 22:28.

The statement in Jer. 22:30, that Jehoiachin would be recorded as childless, appears to be symbolic of the Lord’s curse against Jehoiachin. In I Chron. 3:17-24 we find that he had seven sons and among his descendants was his grandson Zerubbabel who later led a group of exiled Jews

back to Jerusalem and helped in rebuilding the temple and reestablishing the worship. See Ezra 3. The prophet explains his seemingly contradictory statement by saying that none of Jehoiachin's descendants would occupy the throne of David. Jehoiachin was deposed, and his uncle Zedekiah was placed on the throne as a puppet king. See II Kgs. 24:15-17.

Over the years many archaeological excavations have been conducted at Babylon. One of these excavations conducted in 1928 by Ernst F. Weidner and his colleagues uncovered about three hundred cuneiform tablets in a building near the Ishtar Gate. One of the tablets measuring 3 X 6 inches (7.62 cm. X 15.24 cm.) listed some of the food items given out to prisoners from many countries including Judah. The names of some of the prisoners are given including Jehoiachin whose name appears as "Yaukin, king of Yahud." The tablet containing his name is dated about 592 B.C. and it provides evidence that at least some of the Babylonians still regarded Jehoiachin as king of Judah even though he was in exile and had been replaced by Zedekiah. (Albright, 1961, pp. 106-108.) See also Pfeiffer, 1966, pp. 132 and 302.

### **The righteous branch. 23:1-8**

This block is composed of two separate but connected oracles. The first (vss. 1-4) is an oracle of judgment against the evil shepherds (rulers) and the second (vss. 5-8) is an oracle of deliverance or Messianic promise tied to "David's righteous branch." The prose section made up of verses 7-8 is really part of the Messianic promise. Part of the purpose is to draw a contrast between the state of affairs currently being experienced and that which is God's purpose in the future. In one there is the reality of corruption abuse and the irresponsibility of the rulers. In the other there is compassion, justice, and righteousness. The date of this pericope is thought to be during the latter part of the reign of Zedekiah. This is partly because there is a play on the words of the phrase, "the Lord is our righteousness" and the name "Zedekiah" which means "the Lord is righteous" or "the Lord is my righteousness." Jeremiah uses these meanings in his oracle.

The prophet begins the judgment oracle (23:1-4) by addressing the shepherds who scatter and destroy the Lord's sheep. Kings and other rulers are frequently referred to as shepherds since they guide their "flocks." Jeremiah has already addressed each of the kings which followed Josiah beginning with Shallum (Jehoahaz) to Jehoiachin. Now he comes to the last of Judah's rulers, Zedekiah whose name fits perfectly into his message. Rather than describing Zedekiah's evil deeds he simply uses the meaning of his name. The woes of these oracles seem to apply to all of the kings after Josiah. All were evil, and the opening of this oracle speaks of them as evil shepherds.

Various commentators call attention to the words describing and contrasting the conduct of the shepherds with the words used to describe God's punishment of the shepherds. The shepherds have not attended (give attention to) the sheep but the Lord will attend (give attention to) the evil done by the shepherds. Verses 1-3 speak of the scattering of the flock, but the Lord will gather the remnant of his flock together. Jeremiah uses this word also in chapters 24 and 40-44. The idea (doctrine) of the remnant is also presented by other prophets. See Is. 10, 20-22, 11:11-16, Ezek. 9:8, Am. 5:15, Mic. 5:7-8. In the New Testament Paul speaks of the remnant referring to the small number of Jews who accepted the gospel (Rom. 9:27, 11:5). Some commentators argue that this is evidence of a post-exilic origin, but it is easily demonstrated that earlier prophets

also used the term “remnant” in a similar way. The use of this term shows the Lord’s intention to bring the people back to the land under a king who would exhibit righteousness, but the number of people would be greatly diminished compared to the nation of David’s or Solomon’s day.

All through the book Jeremiah inserts statements of hope if the people will repent and return to the Lord. Verses 7-8 give a change in tone from the condemnation of the kings and the doom of the city of Jerusalem to the hope of a future restoration. These verses tell us that it is God’s plan that if the people will repent and live lives of fidelity and godliness there will be a thriving secure post-exilic community. The restoration of which he speaks will be a landmark in their history even surpassing the wonder of the exodus event. Many times when the people took an oath or made an important declaration they would say, “As the Lord lives who brought the Israelites up out of Egypt,” this or that is true. Instead of that formula the new formula will be a reference to the time when all of scattered Israel and Judah will be gathered and restored to their land and righteous living will characterize the nation. “As the Lord lives who brought the descendants of Israel up out of the land of the north and out of all the countries where he had banished them.”

Some believe that this is an unconditional promise to be fulfilled at the second coming of Christ and a millennial reign. However, we must always remember the tone of the book and the general character of the promises being made to the people of Jeremiah’s day. Such descriptions of a peaceful and happy life for God’s people is always expressed as the Lord’s purpose and desire for his nation, but obedience, fidelity, and godly living are always required. See 16:14-15 which has almost identical content. These passages must be taken in context rather than inserting into them a foreign element of eschatology. With that in mind we cannot view this as an eschatological restoration being foretold. Instead, it shows that it is God’s desire that his people learn from their exile experience to be faithful and true to him so that the ideals of the God-Israel relationship can be fully realized. Ultimately the Messianic hope of Israel was consummated in Jesus Christ, the Davidic Messiah and the righteous Branch *i.e.* a king who would reign wisely and do what is right in the land (23:5). Seen from a Christian perspective, we can consider this a legitimate Messianic prophecy. However to the people of Jeremiah’s day the Messianic expectation, in the sense that we as Christians see it, was still very unclear. In both Hebrew and Greek the words for “Messiah” simply mean “anointed” and can refer to any “anointed” servant of God such as prophets, kings, priests, and others. Therefore the so-called “Messianic expression” passages in the Old Testament may or may not refer to the Savior coming into the world. Context must be strongly considered when reading them. Without doubt, the people of Jeremiah’s day saw this passage as the prediction of a time when an anointed king of the lineage of David would rule over a peaceful nation brought back from exile, and the reuniting of the people of the kingdoms of Judah and Israel. The history of Israel during the Intertestamental Period shows their lack of repentance which was God’s condition for the restoration of their kingdom.

### **Oracles concerning the prophets and their prophecies. 23:9-40**

This section is made up of six separate but related pericopes. It begins with the superscription, “Concerning the prophets.” It is devoted to the false prophets who assured the people that there would be peace, prosperity, and security but in fact Judah’s future would have none of those blessings.

### **The land and its adulteries. 23:9-12**

It is important to remember that the people of Israel and Judah probably had difficulty telling the difference between a true prophet of God and a false prophet. In Samaria the same problem was faced when Amos, Hosea, and others brought God's messages of warning. All of the prophets, both false and true, were basically the preachers of their day. The false preachers probably had a more attractive message than the true preachers. The prophets of God were inspired and delivered God's word. However, many false prophets made the same claims as the true prophets – "We are speaking in the name of the Lord." See 23:17, 25. Thus, the people would probably have sensed an atmosphere of competition between the "prophets." The whole picture is more complex than this but there is an important truth here. None of the prophets had a "Bible" to refer to as authority although they could, and did, refer to the Law. Other credentials such as certain signs and miracles were performed very infrequently by the true prophets, *e.g.* Elijah's contest on Mt. Carmel. These powers did not dominate the prophetic scene. The false prophets sometimes claimed to have revelations, visions, dreams, etc. from God.

Separating the true from the false was not always an easy task for the people. Jeremiah was constantly faced with the pagan prophets as well as false prophets claiming to speak for the Lord although they had no true revelation from him. Many people who heard Jeremiah's pronouncements of doom for the nation did not welcome his message nearly as readily as the message from the false prophets preaching peace, optimism, prosperity, and security for the nation.

In verse 9 Jeremiah expresses his own sorrow and lamentation. He loves the nation very much, but he is constantly faced with their evil and he knows the consequences. He uses the expression that his bones are shaking or trembling and his heart is broken. The broken heart probably expresses a deeper sense of shattering than simply disappointment. In the ancient world the heart was considered the seat of mental activity rather than the emotions. God's word bears down on Jeremiah so deeply that he staggers in his mind like a drunken man staggers as he walks. He is completely overwhelmed with this thought. He is not himself. In 9:1-2 he wanted to remove himself from the sorrow of seeing his nation practicing such evil.

Verses 10-12 give a description of the adulteries and evil in the land. The word "adulteries" is frequently used in the Old Testament to describe spiritual apostasy as well as sexual sins. There is an interesting contrast here. The worship of Baal – the Canaanite god of fertility, rain, and storms – was characterized by the grossest immorality which was performed with religious sanction. This became very attractive to the people of Israel. Many of these sexual practices and rites were specifically aimed at bringing fertility to the land, the animals, and the people. Instead, those practices, along with their other sins had brought nothing favorable to them. The parched land and the withered pastures were mute testimony to the ineffectiveness of such rituals and pagan practices. The statement in verses 10-11 ends with the Lord saying that the false prophets use their power unjustly. Indeed, both prophet and priest are godless. Therefore their doom is sealed. Verse 12 describes it as a slippery path on which they are moving and they will be banished to darkness and fall. The disaster which is to come is truly an act of the Lord, not chance.

### **The prophets of Samaria and Jerusalem lead the people astray. 23:13-15**

Although Jeremiah did not live during the demise of the northern kingdom he was thoroughly familiar with their sins. In verse 9 he decries their repulsive evil, but shows that it was the prophets of Baal who led the people away from the Lord. As Jeremiah spoke of the apostasy of the North he probably had an attentive and agreeable audience much as Amos had when he spoke to the northern kingdom about the sins of Judah. See Amos 1-2. As stated above, the prophets of Baal were characterized by all sorts of sexual immorality, and they would be readily identifiable as prophets of a pagan god and therefore false prophets.

The false prophets in Jerusalem who claimed to speak for the Lord might not have been as readily identifiable. They claimed to have dreams and visions from the Lord and to be speaking on his behalf but they also committed adultery and practiced all sorts of evil. They encouraged evil practices and called no one back to the Lord. No repentance was necessary because God was with the nation. Jeremiah said they were living a lie. In poetic duplication he said these false prophets were like Sodom to the Lord, and the people are like Gomorrah. The responsibility for the moral degradation of the people is resting on the shoulders of these false prophets who claimed to be speaking from the Lord. See Jer. 6:13-14 8:11-15.

Verse 15 tells of the punishment. They will be given wormwood to eat and poisoned water to drink. The word translated “wormwood” in most English versions is translated “bitter food” in the NIV. For comparisons see Prov. 5:1-4, Amos 5:7, and Amos 6:12. Some commentators believe that the food and drink mentioned here symbolize a banquet at which one would expect the very best food. At this banquet however the food is bitter wormwood and poisonous water.

### **Some marks of a false prophet. 23:16-22**

Fleming James says, “Among Jeremiah’s most ferocious opponents stood the prophets of prosperity. Always they were contradicting his gloomy words with the brightest of promises. ‘They say continually unto those who despise me, Yahweh hath said, You shall have peace; And to every one that walketh in the stubbornness of his own heart they say, No harm will come to you (23:17).’” (James, 1939, p. 316.) People generally listen to what they want to hear and turn back from those things which are unpleasant. Although Jeremiah’s messages contained rays of hope, forgiveness, and reconciliation, most of the time they were primarily warnings of God’s wrath because of their immorality and the evil of following pagan gods. The Lord’s rays of hope demanded repentance. This is contrasted with messages of peace, prosperity, security, and triumph presented by the false prophets and requiring no repentance. The people did not want to listen to Jeremiah’s message so he interjected a brief section in which he identifies some marks of false prophets.

In verse 16 he begins by saying, “This is what the Lord Almighty says.” The first thing he warns them about is the message of false hopes. Even in the days of obvious evil these prophets are pandering to the popular wishes of the people by proclaiming peace when there is no peace on the horizon. These prophets were claiming to have visions and dreams from the Lord but are deluding the people. Their visions of peace are only their own imaginations at work. Those prophets despise Jeremiah because he speaks of coming disaster – people do not like to hear of

coming disasters. In true poetic form Jeremiah says, “They keep saying to those who despise me, ‘The Lord says: ‘You will have peace.’ And to all who follow the stubbornness of their hearts they say, ‘No harm will come to you.’” ( 23:17)

In verse 18 he asks, “Which of them has stood in the council of the Lord to see or to hear his word?” The false prophets have insisted that they have words from the Lord, yet they have never stood in his council. Jeremiah is attempting to convince his people that the claims of the false prophets have no basis because they are out of touch with the Lord. In various places in the prophetic writings and during the life of Christ as well the Israelites were characterized by a feeling of excessive national pride, religious and moral complacency, and a false sense of national security. Why? Their answer would have been, “Because we are God’s chosen people.” Jeremiah may very well have had some of this kind of strict nationalism in mind as he delivered his messages. Although not specifically stated, there are bits of information throughout the book which seem to move in this direction. Both Judah and Israel took great pride in their national identity as God’s people. Their feeling seems to have been, “We are God’s nation. We are his people. Jerusalem is his city and the temple is his dwelling place. Therefore he will not allow disaster to come upon us.” Historically such thoughts as these have blinded people to the realities surrounding their national evils. The dictators of World War II and the blindness of their followers are prime examples of this. Unfortunately churches are not immune to these attitudes.

Verses 19-22 speak of the anger of the Lord and his rebuttal against the claims of the false prophets. God is like a terrible storm which destroys all in its path. This wrath will be the punishment of those who prophesy falsely to the people. “In days to come you will understand it clearly” (vs. 20). This is not an eschatological statement but one of immediate warning. The implication is that the false prophets refuse to examine the Lord’s words now, but the time will come when they will see the reality of his wrath. The false prophets did not look at their own violations of the covenant and the Law or those of the people.

### **The presence of God. 23:23-24.**

The Lord seems to pause for a moment here to remind the people of his own omnipresence. He does this with three rhetorical questions. Some commentators take this pericope a separate statement from the Lord while others see it as an integral part of verses 16-22. There is certainly a dynamic connection, but these two verses have the tone of a parenthetical statement from the Lord.

His rhetorical questions are, (1) “Am I only a God who is nearby and not a God who is far away?” (2) “Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see him?” (3) “Do I not fill heaven and earth?” The answer to the first question is, “I am not only an imminent God, one who is close by, I am also a transcendent God, one who is far from you, *i.e.* completely above and beyond you.” The answer to question 2 is, “No, neither you nor anyone else can hide in a secret place where I cannot find you.” Finally the answer to question 3 is “Yes, I fill the heaven and the earth.” The answers to questions 2 and 3 become the answer to question 1. See Ps. 139:7-12, Amos 9:1-4.

These answers would have been considered very strong when seen from the vantage point of paganism – Baal worship, etc. – because their view of their gods was very local. They had national gods, gods of certain forces of nature, gods of mountains, gods of the plains, etc. The Lord is stating that he does not fit into any of their categories. He is omnipotent (all powerful), omniscient (he has all knowledge), and omnipresent (he is everywhere). It may be that the false prophets were considering the Lord as a sort of local deity – “the God of Israel” – rather than the Almighty. The eighth century prophets address the evil concept that the Lord was just one more god in the pantheon of paganism along with Baal, Asherah, Dagon, Molech, etc.

### **Dreams and visions of false prophets contrasted with the word of God. 23:25-32.**

Communications from a god through visions and dreams have been claimed by people of all generations from very ancient times until our own time. In this pericope Jeremiah challenges the visions and dreams of the false prophets and contrasts them with the true word of the Lord. We, as they must challenge these false claims. Our prophet brings up the character of the Lord as part of this challenge. When we do not know the nature of God it is difficult to combat misrepresentations of him and his teaching. Falling into idolatry can frequently be traced back to a misunderstanding of the characteristics of God. Jeremiah, as well as many of the other prophets reminds the people of this fact.

The first thing he says in verse 25 is that those prophets claim to speak for the Lord but they lie about their dreams or visions. These are only delusions of their own minds. A practical difficulty arises here. God has communicated to his people through dreams and visions so the question arises, “Who are we to believe? Through whom is God *really* speaking?” The question is not an easy one. The first part of the answer has to do with the prophets forgetting the Lord’s name and exchanging it for that of Baal. The worship of the false god tends to make a person forget the character and nature of the true God. God’s true word is not one of ease and comfort, but he is demanding our devotion and loyalty. Therefore Jeremiah tells the people that God says his word is like a fire and a hammer which breaks a rock in pieces, vss. 28-29. Looking back on the content of the book thus far we must conclude that God is a moral God of holiness and purity. On the other hand Baal worship was filled with sexual perversions and immorality of all kinds. The false prophets were far removed from this since they did not understand the true nature of the Lord.

All of this being true, verse 30 begins by the Lord stating, “I am against the prophets who steal from one another words supposedly from me.” They “wag their own tongues but at the same time declare that this is the word of the Lord. Verses 31-32 draw on this premise where he says that through their false visions and false dreams they lead the people astray with reckless lies which do not benefit the people. Not only was the message of the false prophets a group of lies, but their lives were immoral (vss. 13-15), they proclaimed messages of peace when judgment against Judah was coming soon (vss. 16-17), they had not stood in the council of God (vss. 18-22), and they depended on their dreams and borrowed from each other (vss. 23-32). Jeremiah stood in stark contrast to the false prophets.



### **What is God's true revelation to the people? 23:33-40.**

The work of a prophet is not easy so he must consider his work very seriously, not as a profession but as the answer to the Lord's call as Jeremiah had done in 1:1-10, or Isaiah in Is. 6:1-9, or Amos in Am. 7:10-16 and others. God will punish the prophet and his household if that prophet speaks false oracles, claiming they are from the Lord. The Lord does not permit men to say, "This is an oracle from the Lord" when it is only his dream or his so-called vision. God will forget such a person and cast him out. Everlasting disgrace and shame will be his.

### **Additional notes on true prophets and false prophets.**

R.K. Harrison has some excellent comments on the contrast between false and true prophets and the marks of identification of each.

Given two men dressed in similar clothing, each claiming to be God's messenger and prefacing his remarks with 'This is what God says,' it must have been far from easy to decide from external appearances which person was proclaiming revealed truth. Closer observation, however, would have made the differences between true and false prophets apparent. Genuine prophets stood consistently in the spirit of the Mosaic Law, exemplifying by their lives the ethos of the covenant relationship. Their inspired utterances formed an extension of the spiritual communion which they enjoyed with God, and his word in their minds became their word to society. Because of the corruptions of the day many of their pronouncements were highly critical, challenging people to return to the covenantal ideals of Sinai. The divine word within them was like a fire which consumed whatever was unworthy and made them persons of absolute integrity.

False prophets, by contrast, were indistinguishable from the rest of society in the matter of personal character, being essentially frauds who profaned sacred things and perverted the divine word by making it appear ludicrous. Their dreams were false, they told lies, deceived their hearers, and were spiritually irresponsible because they were not subject to a positive ethos. They proclaimed what people liked to hear, not what God had to say to them, and they invariably brought a message which would quiet the conscience and give it a delusive peace. About this latter they seemed greatly concerned, since their own worldly interests flourished best in an undisturbed environment. However, they were thinking of peace merely as the absence of turmoil or social conflict, and not as the triumph of divine righteousness among men. So far from being models of spiritual integrity, the false prophets were hypocrites who compromised the moral ethos of the Torah at every turn while professing to be God's spokesmen to the nation. Absolute loyalty and obedience to the revealed will and word of the Lord was the ultimate criterion for distinguishing between true and false prophets. The deficient spirituality of the latter led to an equally inadequate understanding of God's dealings with his people. Consequently their pronouncements were false because they did not appreciate the conditional character of Israelite covenantal traditions, and therefore they misread completely the contemporary political situation.

(Harrison, 1973, on CD)

## **Chapter VIII**

### **Two Visions and God's Judgment**

#### **24:1—25:38**

#### **Introduction**

Once again we encounter difficulty in linking parts of the book of Jeremiah. In 24:1-10 we have the vision of the good and bad figs. This took place after the reign of Jehoiachin which apparently places it early in the reign of Zedekiah. We are assuming that there was not an interim period between the deposing of Jehoiachin and the accession of Zedekiah. Since the writer dates the oracle from the period after the reign of Jehoiachin rather than during the reign of Zedekiah we might conclude that it was fairly early in Zedekiah's reign but we cannot be certain of the time. Thompson and most other commentators say that this places the date at about 597 B.C., the time of the first deportation. (Thompson, 1980, p. 507.) At that time Nebuchadnezzar had laid siege to Jerusalem but the siege was soon lifted with Jehoiachin surrendered, II Kgs. 24:10-11. The king, his wives, his mother, various governmental officials, and thousands of Israelites were all taken to Babylon as captives. Nebuchadnezzar also took many artifacts of gold and other treasures from the temple and palace, II Kgs. 24:8-17 and II Chron. 36:9-10. Nebuchadnezzar made Zedekiah king replacing Jehoiachin. About this time a strongly negative element was brought on the scene when Hananiah, a false prophet told Jeremiah, the priests, and the people that the Lord would break the back of Nebuchadnezzar and bring the exiles back within two years. As we will see later, Jeremiah refuted this claim. Jer. 28:1-16.

#### **The vision of good and bad figs. 24:1-10**

The statement in verse 1 dates this event at the time after Nebuchadnezzar had deported "Jeconiah the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah." The vision describes a scene in front of the temple. In dialogue form the Lord showed the prophet two baskets of figs asking him what he saw. Jeremiah replies that he saw two baskets of figs, one good (early ripened) and the other very bad. The fact that the figs were placed in front of the temple reminds us of the presentation of the first fruits of the harvest to the Lord as in Deut. 26:1-11. One basket contained bad figs perhaps symbolizing the practice of some Israelites who gave not the best but the poorest of the first fruits to the Lord. See Mal. 1:6-10.

Verse 4 shows us that the good figs represented some of the people who had already been deported but were "good." However, they still had to endure the perils of the exile. We remember that the first deportation was of those who were artisans, craftsmen, and the educated, II Kgs. 24:14. Chapter 26 shows that some of these people had intervened on Jeremiah's behalf.

Verses 6-7 speak of the return of some of the people to the land and the Lord's promise to build them up and not tear them down. They will be planted and not uprooted. Once again this ray of hope and optimism shines through the gloom of Jeremiah's condemnation of the nation.

Verses 8-10 describe the "bad figs" as those people who are left in the land, King Zedekiah and his officials and those Israelites who fled to Egypt. This might also have an indirect reference to

the fact that Zedekiah later rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar, II Kgs. 24:18-20 and II Chron. 36:11-14, causing the Babylonians to invade Judah again. This took place in 587 B. C. when the city of Jerusalem was destroyed. Their fate is described as abhorrent, an offense to all the kingdoms of the earth, a reproach and a byword, and an object of ridicule and cursing. The Lord will send sword, famine and plague against them until they are destroyed. This is one of Jeremiah's most severe descriptions of punishment against the people.

Encouragement for some to flee to Egypt may have come as a result of a battle between Egypt and Babylon which is recorded in the Babylonian Chronicle but is not in the Old Testament account. Egypt defeated Babylon in one of these battles. Some of the people of Judah saw the power of Babylon as the major threat while others were keenly aware of Pharaoh Neco's power. Some believed that it would be safer to cast their lot with Babylon while others thought that their safest destination was Egypt. Jeremiah shows that there was constant maneuvering and controversy within Israel between the pro-Babylon faction and the pro-Egypt faction.

At some time during the latter part of Judah's pre-Exilic history a colony of Jews was established in Egypt. This may have begun as early as 609 B.C. when Pharaoh Neco deposed Jehoahaz and took him to Egypt (II Kgs. 23:34) or perhaps it came later when Nebuchadnezzar invaded Judah about 603 B.C. making Jehoiakim a vassal. It may even have been close to the time of Nebuchadnezzar's final invasion of 598-597 B.C. Chapters 43-44 tell us of a strong controversy within the nation when some fled to Egypt. There are various possibilities here. We know of a colony of Jews which was established at Elephantine but the exact time of its founding is not clear. The false prophets were saying that peace would come and that within two years the exiles would return. Neither of these predictions came true.

### **Judgment on Judah and the promise of restoration. 25:1-14**

This pericope is divided into two basic themes. First there is the lengthy statement concerning the evil conduct of the nation and the people's refusal to listen to the prophets. Jeremiah links this to the consequences of their apostasy, *i.e.* the coming Babylonian Exile (25:1-11). In the second division he follows that declaration with the promise of Judah's restoration to the land (25:12-14).

Verse 1 dates this pericope in the fourth year of the reign of Jehoiakim which was the first year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign over Babylon. This would make it in the year 605 B.C., the year Nebuchadnezzar defeated the Egyptians (under Pharaoh Neco) and the remaining Assyrians (under Ashur-uballit II) at Carchemish. That battle resulted in Babylon becoming the dominant force in the entire Fertile Crescent. This made it clear that Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians are "the foe from the north." The dating in 25:1 has a link to 1:1-3 where a similar statement was made.

Verses 2-3 introduce Jeremiah's warning to the people and the fact that they have consistently rejected his words as the words of the Lord. Three times in this chapter Jeremiah calls attention to the fact that he has spoken the word of the Lord to them, but you "have not listened." Verses 4-7 continue this accusation by saying that prophets in the past had also appealed to the people to turn from their evil but they refused to listen. Instead of listening to Jeremiah and the other true

prophets they continued to make idols with their own hands. Once again the Lord inserts the stipulation that if they turn from their evil he will not harm them. On the other hand, verse 7 states that by their refusal to listen to the Lord and heed his warnings they will bring harm to themselves.

In verses 8-11 the Lord says that his “servant,” Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and all the nations of the north will come down and completely destroy the land of Judah and the surrounding nations. Those nations are not identified. The destruction will be complete and they will become a scorn and an everlasting ruin. All joy and gladness will be taken away and the sound of weddings will not be heard. The country will become a wasteland and the people will serve the king of Babylon for seventy years. The prophet applies these statements not only to Judah, but the surrounding nations as well (25:9).

It is interesting that a declaration is made that Nebuchadnezzar, the evil pagan king of Babylon is the “servant” of the Lord. It reminds us of Isaiah’s later statement concerning Cyrus, Is. 44:28—45:3, 45:13 and Daniel’s statement concerning God’s direction of governments, Dan. 4:24-25. In Old Testament history the word “servant” is frequently used to describe a vassal of another country. That being the case, the Lord is actually calling Nebuchadnezzar his “vassal.” The Old Testament is clear that the Lord is sovereign, and uses governments, whether good or evil, to carry out his purposes. The first specific information we have concerning this is in Gen. 15:12-17 where God assures Abraham that his descendants will escape from Egyptian servitude to occupy the land of Canaan. In that passage God’s sovereignty is strongly affirmed as he states his intent to intervene in the affairs of the Amorites and punish them for their evil. Notice the expression, “the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.”

In verses 12-14 Jeremiah begins speaking of the restoration of the exiled people of Judah. First however, he says that the Lord will punish Babylon for its evil, making their land desolate. Then he will restore Judah to its own land. Verse 13 presents a problem. The Lord says he will bring upon that land, speaking of Babylon, “all the things I have spoken against it, all that are written in this book and prophesied by Jeremiah against all the nations.” Bright and others believe that the simplest explanation is that this statement was intended to be a sort of heading for the summary of God’s intended punishment in verses 15-38 rather than the conclusion of verse 14. (Bright, 1965, p. 163.) Craigie, *et al.*, believe that the book (scroll) being spoken of in this passage is the one referred to in chapter 36. When it was read to Jehoiakim he cut it up with his knife and burned it. Later it was rewritten by Baruch as Jeremiah directed him. (Craigie, *et al.*, 1991, on CD.)

### **The cup of God’s wrath. 25:15-29**

Once again Jeremiah is instructed to do something in order to announce God’s message. Previously he had gone to the potter’s house where he received an object lesson; he also had the experience with broken pot as part of another revelation. In this pericope the Lord said, “Take from my hand this cup filled with the wine of my wrath and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it” 25:15. The figure of God’s wrath being symbolized by a cup of wine appears in a number of places in the Old Testament, e.g. Is. 51:17, Ezek. 23:32-34, Hab. 2:16, Lam. 4:21, etc.

The prophet tells about his experience in obeying the voice of the Lord, listing the various nations he visited. He brought the message that each of those nations would fall by the sword and not get up again. About twenty kingdoms are specified, but the descriptions sometimes include more than one, *e.g.* Philistia. Those which are identified are Judah, Egypt, Uz, Philistia, Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre, Sidon and other coastal kingdoms and those across the sea, Dedan, Tema, Buz, Arabia and the desert kingdoms, Zimri, Elam, Media, kings of the north, and Sheshach. Each is instructed to drink the wine until they are drunk and vomit and fall down. They will not rise up but will be killed with the sword. The kingdom of Zimri is not known in history as such, but a system of writing using numbers is thought by some commentators to identify Zimri as Elam and Sheshak (or Sheshach) as Babylon. This system was known as “Atbash.” Thompson and other commentators believe that this practice may have been used by some nations to disguise the identity of a person or an adversarial nation. “The Atbash is a device in which the letters of a name counted from the beginning of the alphabet are exchanged for letters counted from the end.” (Thompson, 1980, p. 518, n13.) This method of spelling was used by some ancient nations to conceal identities from hostile people or governments. Compare this with chapters 46-51 where the oracles against certain nations are more descriptive, and the Atbash is used.

This does not answer all of the questions one might have about such identities however. Why would Jeremiah want to disguise the names of any of the nations, especially Babylon? Verse 29 provides the rationale for God’s action just described. “See, I am beginning to bring disaster on the city that is called by my name, and how can you possibly avoid punishment? You shall not go unpunished, for I am summoning a sword against all the inhabitants of the earth, says the Lord of hosts.” Jer. 25:29, NRSV. Just as the Lord had punished his own nation for their evil, so also he will punish other evil nations. This brings to mind God’s original commission to Jeremiah: “I appointed you as a prophet to the nations” 1:5. The particulars of God’s wrath against some of these nations are stated at various places in the book of Jeremiah. Once again we see how the Lord acts in the history of nations. None is exempt from God’s intervention and his judgment.

### **Oracles against the nations. 25:30-38**

From the prose section including 23:25 to 25:29, the prophet now turns once again to poetry. Poetic descriptive language serves well to give vivid imagery to his message of universal judgment. Verse 31 pictures the present scene as a court of law in which the Lord indicts the nations of the world although none is specifically identified in this oracle. Jeremiah pictures the Lord as a roaring lion, thunder, or identified in a storm (verse 30). Imagery such as this had been used by other prophets, and was a well established symbol in Israel. The fate of evil nations is vividly described as the poet uses the familiar Hebrew poetic devices of parallelism and duplication.

Picturing the Lord as a lion and as thunder emphasizes his strength and determination to accomplish the purpose he is about to disclose to the nations. He shouts as those who tread out the grapes. He speaks with authority from on high. In verses 30-32 the intent of the Lord is described and a picture of the destruction is portrayed. He will bring charges against the nations and bring judgment on all mankind. The wicked will be put to the sword.

A brief prose section follows in verse 33 where the dead bodies are said to be all over the earth. No one will mourn the dead and none will be around to bury them. They will be like garbage lying on the ground. Verses 34-37 describe the shepherds, the rulers and kings, as they are humiliated, rolling in the dust, and seeing the slaughter of their flocks. There is nowhere for them to go, and they cannot flee or hide from the consequences of their evil. They will wail and cry as they see their flocks massacred and their pastures destroyed. The meadows which were once peaceful are now a wasteland because the anger of the Lord has finally been shown to the evil nations.

Verse 38 describes the result. The lion will leave his thicket and the land will become desolate. The fierce anger of the Lord and the power of his sword have accomplished his intent. The nations which ruled without him have suffered their ultimate defeat. Justice has been meted out. All of the people of the earth now see that the action of the Lord is not confined to his punishment of Israel, but is extended to all nations of the world.

## **Chapter IX**

### **Jeremiah and the False Prophets**

#### **26:1—29:32**

#### **Introduction**

This section, 26:1—29:32 recounts three different important incidents in Jeremiah's life but there is a common theme which runs throughout – the conflict which our prophet has with the religious leaders of Judah, *i.e.* the priests and other prophets. See Chapter VII. "Evil Kings and False Prophets." It was not an easy task for some of the people, and Jeremiah was constantly faced with this challenge.

The events in the block of text we are considering in this chapter do not take place in the same time period, but the subject matter is the tie which binds them together. Certain stylistic changes will also be noticed in this block.

#### **The temple sermon and Jeremiah's arrest. 26:1-24**

This section, 26:1-24, divides itself into three parts. First there is the sermons (26:1-6), second is the arrest and partial defense of the prophet (26:7-15), and third there is the verdict that he was not to be put to death, and the recall of incidents regarding two other prophets, Micah of Moresheth and Uriah, 26:16-24. Micah is the prophet who wrote the book of Micah. He prophesied during the reign of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, 26:16-18 and Mic. 1:1. Uriah is a non-literary prophet and is spoken of as the son of Shemaiah. Verse 24 is a sort of concluding statement regarding Jeremiah.

Verses 1-6 begin by stating that the time of the events about to be described was early in the reign of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah. We remember that Jehoiakim was made king by Pharaoh Neco when Jehoahaz was deposed. There were various ways that the ancients of the Middle East calculated the period of a king's reign. These variations in method account for some of the chronological differences as we calculate dates and time of accession or death of a king. It is difficult to know just what method might have been used by the writers of the Old Testament in any given period. At different times they may have used different methods.

Earlier in 7:1-15 and now in 26:1-6 Jeremiah is told to go to the temple. Commentators are in general agreement that the present events constitute a reiteration of the temple sermon in 7:1-15. However in 7:2 he is told to "stand at the gate of the Lord's house" whereas here he is told to "stand in the courtyard of the Lord's house." The gates of the city were the common places for courts to be held, but the temple gate apparently was also used for that purpose. We will see that Jeremiah's trial was held here. The courts of the temple were open areas in the temple complex. Different sections of the temple grounds were given names such as the inner courtyard (I Kgs. 6:36), the great courtyard (I Kgs. 7:9), the middle courtyard (II Kgs. 20:4), the courtyard of the priests (II Chron. 4:9), and the outer court (II Chron. 6:13). Others are mentioned by Josephus in his description of Herod's Temple during the days of Christ. Generally speaking the courtyards were public areas of the temple complex. In I Kgs. 7:12 during the building of Solomon's tem-

ple the writer mentions that the “great courtyard was surrounded by a wall of three courses of dressed stones and one course of trimmed cedar.” The grandeur and size of the temple was a source of great pride for Israel.

In verses 2 the Lord instructed Jeremiah to address the crowd, not leaving out a single word given to him by the Lord. The crowd was made up of people from the cities of Judah. The purpose of Jeremiah’s sermon was to bring the people to repentance, giving the Lord the opportunity to “relent and not bring on them the disaster I was planning because of the evil they have done,” vs. 3. Many English translations use the word “repent” rather than “relent” in this place. The word actually means to turn, change one’s mind, or a change of heart. It has nothing to do with the direction of the change except as the context demands.

Verses 4-6 contain a warning that if the people do not listen, as they had refused to listen in the past, then the Lord says, “I will make this house like Shiloh and this city an object of cursing among all the nations of the earth,” 26:6. In 7:12-14 a similar statement is made concerning Shiloh: “Go now to the place in Shiloh where I first made a dwelling for my Name, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of my people Israel,” 7:12. This is a warning to the people that the city of Jerusalem and the temple are going to suffer the same fate if they do not heed Jeremiah’s warnings. See “Notes on Shiloh” below.

The response of the priests, the prophets, and the people was predictable. Verses 7-10 say they seized him and commanded that he be put to death because he had prophesied against the city and the house of God, and had done so in the name of the Lord. Once again they placed their confidence in the false premise that God would not allow any tragedy to come upon his own city, his own house (the temple), and his own people. Jeremiah was considered a false prophet. To them this was blaspheme on two counts; he spoke “falsely” in the name of the Lord, and he spoke “falsely” against the house of the Lord. Blaspheme constituted a capital crime, punishable by death. This could also have been considered treason since it addressed the downfall of the nation.

When the “officials of Judah” heard of this they immediately conducted a formal legal inquiry. The word translated “officials” is sometimes translated “princes.” However it usually refers, not to men of the royal family but to legal officials of Judah. When they heard of the accusations they came to the temple and took their places at the entrance of the New Gate. They are named in 36:11-12. In verses 11-12 the prosecution – the priests and prophets – held that Jeremiah had spoken against the city and therefore should be put to death. Jeremiah’s defense was a reiteration of his original message. God had sent him to prophesy against the temple and the city, and the words he had spoken were the words of the Lord. Only the repentance of the people could save the nation, 26:13.

He was powerless and in the hands of the crowd. He challenged them to do what they believed was right and good, warning them that if they killed him they would bring the guilt of slaying innocent blood on themselves, the city, and those who live in it. His appeal was accepted by “the people” and they turned against the prophets and priests, demanding that Jeremiah be released.



Verses 17-19 present an interesting situation. After the officials of the royal palace had acquitted Jeremiah “some of the elders of the land” supported Jeremiah, quoting the prophet Micah of Moresheth who had prophesied a warning during the days of King Hezekiah. The expression “elders of the land” is unusual, being found only three times in the Old Testament, I Kgs. 20:7, Prov. 31:23, and Jer. 26:17. Frequently we have “Elders” and “Elders of Israel” when speaking of those who met at the gates and decided legal issues. The expression “Elders of Israel” is found twenty-nine times. Micah’s words were respected at the time he spoke and also at the time the elders spoke in Jeremiah’s support. When the people heeded Micah’s words the Lord relented. The statement of the elders now appears to be that they believed God would relent again if the people repent. Micah of Moresheth is not mentioned in any of the historical book of the Old Testament. This reference to Micah’s prophecy shows that the words of past prophets were preserved, well known, and were apparently considered God’s revelation.

Verses 20-23 form a parenthetical statement about the tragic death of the prophet Uriah rather than part of Jeremiah’s defense. Uriah is not known elsewhere in Scripture. His native city was Kiriath-jarim, a city about 8 miles (12.9 km.) northwest of Jerusalem. This is where the Ark of the Covenant was kept soon after it was returned by the Philistines. Later David had it moved to Jerusalem. See I Sam. 7:1-2 and II Sam. 6. Uriah, as a prophet of the Lord had made many of the same proclamations as Jeremiah had made. King Jehoiakim had condemned him and planned to execute him but he fled to Egypt. Even among ancient nations there were treaties of extradition and probably this is what was taking place when Elnathan went to Egypt to bring Uriah back to Jerusalem. Elnathan was the son of Achbor (Jer. 26:22), who may be the same person as the descendant of Micaiah in II Kgs. 22:12. If so, he was part of the group sent by King Josiah to inquire of the Lord concerning the law book found in the temple. However we cannot be certain that this is speaking of the same person. See II Kgs. 22:12-14.

In verse 24 Ahikam, son of Shaphan is shown as a supporter of Jeremiah. He is also mentioned in II Kgs. 22:12 at the time of the discovery of the book of Law during the reign of Josiah and was an advocate of the religious reforms of Josiah. This incident shows that there were still some godly people in Judah in spite of the evil things done by the nation as a whole. In II Kgs. 25:22 he is referred to as the father of Gedaliah whom Nebuchadnezzar later appointed governor of the people left in Jerusalem at the time of the Exile. See also II Chron. 34:20.

Pharaoh Neco had placed Jehoiakim on the throne of Judah when the Egyptian king deposed Jehoahaz. Jehoiakim then became a vassal of Egypt. This fact may have played a part in the transaction which brought Uriah back to Jerusalem. Jehoiakim had Uriah killed and buried in a common grave, probably located in the Kidron Valley which runs along the eastern side of Jerusalem. See II Kgs. 23:6. The Mount of Olives rises just east of the Kidron Valley. When all of these incidents are seen together they show some of the political and religious turmoil present in Judah during the final years before the Exile.

### **Warnings to the nations to submit to Babylon. 27:1-22**

Chapters 27-29 deal with the same general topics as have already been discussed although they do so in different ways. The basic message is, “Do not listen to the false prophets but submit to Babylonian rule for this is the will of God.” This message goes out not only to Judah, but to the

countries of Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre and Sidon. Early in the reign of Zedekiah the envoys of these countries met in Jerusalem. These were the nations on the western extremity of Nebuchadnezzar's empire. When countries are vassals of a hostile enemy, one of their primary objectives will probably be to develop strategies to break that domination. Perhaps one purpose of this meeting in Jerusalem was to map out such strategies for a unified rebellion against Babylon. If so, this may have been high on the agenda for their meeting. The assembly of these envoys gave Jeremiah the opportunity to warn the whole group that they must submit to Babylonian domination because this was part of God's plan.

We know that a whole group of countries were represented among the captives in Babylon. W.F. Albright refers to a discovery made in 1928 by Ernst F. Weidner who directed some of the earliest archaeological excavations at Babylon. Among the roughly three hundred cuneiform tablets discovered in their excavation were some containing the names of many governmental officials, artisans and craftsmen who were captives in Babylon. There were officials from Judah, Ashkelon (Philistia), Tyre, Byblos (Phoenicia), Elam, Media, Persia, Egypt, Ionia, Lydia, and other nations. Some of these nations had been vassals of David and others had entered into trade agreements or other treaties with Israel during the time of David and Solomon. The presence of these names indicates the extent of the conquests of Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians. (Albright, 1961, pp. 106-108.)

The Babylonian Chronicle also sheds additional light on conditions during this period of time. Tablet #21946 of the Chronicle describes some of the political and military turmoil which took place during the period 601- 600 B.C. It refers to one of Babylon's attacks against Egypt which took place between December 601 B.C. and April 600 B. C. This battle is not mentioned in the Old Testament. Both sides experienced heavy casualties and the battle was really a stalemate with neither side able to claim victory. Jehoiakim's rebellion against Babylon took place about 598 B.C., very close to the time of the Babylon-Egypt battle in 601- 600 B.C. (Freedman, 1961, pp. 114-118). Some archaeologists and historians believe that the stalemate of that Babylonian-Egyptian battle may have encouraged Jehoiakim to rebel against Babylon. Keown, *et al.* call attention to other evidence from the Babylonian Chronicle concerning a host of problems which Babylon experienced with uprisings among a number of smaller states in the Syria-Palestine area. (Keown *et al.*, 1995, on CD.)

Thompson says that this entire time period was very difficult for the Babylonians. For the most part the rebellions of these smaller states resulted in their being dominated once again by Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar frequently reduced rebellious people to servitude or captivity. This turmoil could have encouraged the ongoing debate among the Israelites concerning a flight to Egypt or submission to Babylon. (Thompson, 1980, pp. 530-534.) With all of this going on, it is not surprising that the envoys who were gathered in Jerusalem (27:1-3) needed to be warned not to conspire to rebel against Nebuchadnezzar. Jeremiah's warning is addressed to some of the nations close to Judah. They were not to revolt against Babylon because the Babylonian domination was part of God's own plan to punish them for their evil. Later the Lord would punish Babylon itself for its own evils.

In 27:1-2 the time of the next incident is stated. From 28:1 we see that the events described in that chapter took place in the same year as those in chapter 27, *i.e.* the fourth year of the reign of

Zedekiah. Thompson says that this would place it in 594-593 B.C., or about six or seven years before the final destruction of Jerusalem in 587/586 B.C. However, some commentators believe that this is a mistake and they contend that the text should read the “first year.” (Keown, *et al.*, 1995, on CD.)

In most Hebrew manuscripts of the Masoretic Text there is an important textual variant in 27:1. Those manuscripts read “Jehoiakim” instead of “Zedekiah” although some Hebrew manuscripts and the Syriac Version read “Zedekiah.” Most LXX manuscripts do not have this verse at all. When seen in the light of the reading of 28:1 we see that the reading “Zedekiah” is to be preferred. Scholars are divided concerning the exact year being spoken of. The expression “early in the reign” is taken by some (*e.g.* Bright) to be based on Babylonian usage referring to Zedekiah’s accession year even though 28:1 speaks of this as “the same year, the fourth year, early in the reign of Zedekiah.” On the other hand, Thompson and others take the position that the correct reading is “in the fourth year.” (Thompson, 1980, p.537.)

In 27:1-2 Jeremiah is told to place a wooden yoke on his neck symbolic of the yoke which Nebuchadnezzar would place on Israel and the other nations. This type of yoke was placed on the necks of oxen when they were to plow or do other work. Having appeared before the assembly of foreign envoys Jeremiah delivered his message for them to take back to their individual kings. In the “Annals of Sennacherib” there is an account of how some of these same nations had rebelled against the Assyrians between 704 B.C. and 681 B.C. They suffered as a result. (Thompson, 1980, p. 538).

Verses 4-5 begin with Jeremiah’s message. God had created all things, and therefore he had the power to bring about the punishment which Jeremiah was going to disclose. The Lord describes himself as the God of “great power” who created all things and gave the nations to anyone he pleased. In verses 6-7 the Lord said that he had appointed Nebuchadnezzar as his servant, a phrase used earlier in 25:9. The plan of the Lord was to punish certain nations by using Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians. Later however, the Babylonians would be punished for the evil which they had also done. Once again we are reminded of the Lord’s message to Nebuchadnezzar in Dan. 4:24-25: “The Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes.” The Lord acts on the stage of human history. He is not standing far away just watching the actions of the nations of the world. Within his own lifetime Jeremiah he had seen the fall of Nineveh (612 B.C.) and final demise of the vestiges of the Assyrian Empire in 605 B.C. at the Battle of Carchemish. He would also live to see the demise of the Kingdom of Judah in 587 B.C.

Verses 8-11 describe the fate of those who do not submit to the Lord’s plan for Babylon to be the agent of God’s punishment. Sword, famine, and plague would be their destiny. These words were used frequently to describe an invasion by a foreign power and its aftermath. The fairly recent suffering of the smaller nations under Assyrian domination was a grim reminder of the truth of Jeremiah’s warning. Those who chose to resist Babylon instead of submitting to Nebuchadnezzar would suffer captivity as already described. However, if they would stay in their land and allow the Babylonians to dominate they would be able to make their livelihood, till their land, and survive. They would have to pay taxes to Babylon of course. Jeremiah warned them not to listen to the soothsayers, diviners, prophets, interpreters of dreams, and mediums who

were telling them that they would never have to serve the king of Babylon. They were prophesying lies to you Jeremiah said. All of these mediums were outlawed among the Israelites (Deut. 18:9-13). Jeremiah did not speak as a political or military analyst but as one who was burdened with a message from the Lord.

King Zedekiah did not welcome Jeremiah's message. Instead, in 588 B.C. the king rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians laid siege to Jerusalem. The city fell two years later and was destroyed. Zedekiah was captured, his sons killed before his eyes, and he was then blinded and taken to Babylon where he later died (II Kgs. 24:18—25:7).

Verses 12-15 give the imperatives which Jeremiah issued to King Zedekiah. First, he was told to "bow your neck under the yoke" of Babylon, second "do not listen to the words of the prophets who say 'you will not serve the king of Babylon,'" and third is a warning that he and the people must live under the yoke of Babylon, otherwise the Lord would banish both Zedekiah and his people. The basic content of verses 14-15 is almost identical to that in verse 9. The severity of these words could have branded Jeremiah as a traitor engaged in seditious activity.

Verses 16-18 are basically a repeat to the priests and people of the message given to Zedekiah. In these however the prophet gives special mention of the vessels of gold etc. which Nebuchadnezzar had carried to Babylon. The prophets had predicted that these would be quickly returned, but this too was false testimony. Their refusal to submit to the king of Babylon would result in the destruction of the city. He poses the question, "Why should the city become a ruin?" In this question Jeremiah implies that the destruction of Jerusalem need not take place if the people would obey the Lord's directives. They were assured that the time would come when the Lord would bring them back to Jerusalem. If the so called prophets are truly prophets, lest them pray that the furnishings of the temple and palace not be taken to Babylon instead of trying to assure the people that no harm is going to come to them. Verses 19-22 state emphatically that the furnishings of the temple and palace which were earlier left behind will be taken to Babylon later and the city, the temple, and the palace will be destroyed. Once again however the prophet offers hope by saying that the time would come when those items of furniture and the other things along with the people themselves will be restored to the city.

#### **Additional notes on Shiloh.**

In the Old Testament Shiloh is mentioned more than thirty times, primarily in Joshua, Judges, and I Samuel. It also occurs in Jeremiah in three different contexts. See 7:12-14, 26:6-9, and 41:5. In Josh. 18:1 it is mentioned in reference to setting up the Tent of Meeting (the Tabernacle). It also appears that in the early phases of the conquest of Canaan Shiloh was a place where various national representative meetings were held. Some important national and religious decisions were made there. Shiloh was the place where plans were made for the division of the land into tribal areas (Josh. 18:8-10) and the decision to go to war against the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh. Those tribes had built an altar in their own region rather than coming to the Tabernacle at Shiloh. This was considered a break of faith with the remainder of the nation and a rebellion against the Lord, Josh 22:9-12. All of these things emphasize the religious and national importance of Shiloh, and also underline and strengthen the warning of Jere-

miah that its destruction shows God's determination to punish the apostasy of the people. Jerusalem and its temple are not secure simply because of their religious significance.

It is interesting that Shiloh is used as an example of complete destruction because its destruction is not mentioned in the Old Testament. Archaeology has clarified some of this, but the interpretation of the archaeological evidence has been divided. After the battle of Aphek (I Sam. 4:1-11), Shiloh is mentioned only a few times. In September 1922 Aage Schmidt, a Danish archaeologist, sunk about twelve trial pits or shafts through the debris at Seilum which was thought to have been the location of the ancient city of Shiloh. He found pottery dating from the early Israelite period about 1200-1050 B.C. Extensive excavations were made in 1926, 1929, and 1931 which concluded that the city was destroyed about 1050 B.C. This corresponds to the time when the Israelite lost the Ark of the Covenant to the Philistines at the battle of Aphek, a city about 15 miles (24.14 km.) west of ancient Shiloh. W.F. Albright, George Barton, and other prominent archaeologists and scholars believe that the city was completely destroyed by the Philistines in about 1050 B.C. (Albright, 1957, pp. 286-287, and Barton, 1916, pp. 127-128.)

However archaeologists differ in their interpretation of the findings of those excavations and some believe that the site may have been continuously occupied until the close of the eighth century B.C. No dated artifacts have been found at this site. (Keown, *et al.*, 1995, on CD) Their conclusion is based in part on a passage in Judges 19:30-31 which says the "house of God" remained in Shiloh until the time of the captivity of the land. These scholars believe that this is referring to the Assyrian invasion of 722 B.C. when the Kingdom of Israel came to an end. Based on this and a few similar passages they conclude that Shiloh was abandoned but not destroyed. There are other interpretations of these passages however. These statements could be referring to any one of the many temporary invasions of Israel by hostile nations which took place during the period of the judges until the time of Samuel and the battle of Aphek.

### **Hananiah the false prophet. 28:1-17**

Chapter 28 gives the encounters which Jeremiah had with Hananiah the false prophet. Although it is linked to chapters 27 and 29, in some ways it stands alone as a personal encounter rather than a message to a whole group of priests, prophets, or the people in general.

In verse 1 we have a standard date formula which ties these events to those of chapter 27, "the fifth month of the same year, the fourth year, early in the reign of Zedekiah king of Judah." Some commentators believe that there is a misreading of an abbreviation and that the time of the events of 27 and 28 actually occurred "in the first year" rather than "in the fourth year." See the discussion above (27:1-2) concerning the chronology of chapters 27 and 28.

Verse 1 gives the chronological data pointing to 594-593 B.C. as the time of these events. We are then introduced to Hananiah, a false prophet who opposed the messages of Jeremiah. The name Hananiah was fairly common among the Hebrews, but this particular man is otherwise unknown. He was from Gibeon, a town in Benjamin, about six miles (9.65 km.) northwest of Jerusalem.

Verse 2-4 say that Hananiah claimed to be speaking from the Lord and he presented his message as the word of God even though it was the opposite of that which Jeremiah had delivered. His “oracle” was threefold. First he said that the exile would last only two years because the Lord would break the yoke of the king of Babylon; second, all of the articles taken from the house of the Lord would be returned; and third King Jehoiachin and all of the exiles would be returned to Jerusalem at that time. The fact that Hananiah referred to Jehoiachin as “king of Judah” indicates that at least some of the people considered Jehoiachin rather than Zedekiah to be their legitimate king. This may also indicate that the people hoped for his return to reign over Judah in person.

Hananiah may very well have been sincere in his predictions, probably basing them on his own interpretation of the current military and political problems which Babylon was experiencing. See the discussion of these problems (27:1-22) as described in the Babylonian Chronicle. Like many so called prophets today, he could have looked at the “signs of the times” and concluded that it was “the Lord’s will” that certain things in his own mind were authentic “revelations from God” rather than his own imagination at work. Whatever the working of his mind, he predicted just the opposite of Jeremiah’s message. Again, we must remember that this was a military-political topic of utmost importance to the people of Jeremiah’s day.

Verses 5-9 give Jeremiah’s response. He was still wearing the wooden yoke when he encountered Hananiah, and his response may come as a surprise. It may have been laced with sarcasm, but also with a note of sincere wishful thinking on Jeremiah’s part. Jeremiah loved Judah very deeply, and always hoped for its survival and fidelity to the Lord. When Hananiah spoke Jeremiah said, “Amen! May the Lord do so! May the Lord fulfill the words you have prophesied.” He knew the truth, but perhaps for emphasis he said something like, “I could only wish that all that Hananiah has said could be true. Instead, his words are false.”

After stating his deep wish that the words of Hananiah were true Jeremiah states the actual truth of God. That is, the test of a true prophet is whether or not his words come true. Which predictions have come true? Are these the prophets who predicted war and turmoil or those who predicted peace and security? His question was somewhat rhetorical because the answer was obvious. Neither Israel nor Judah has seen peace and tranquility over any extended period.

Verses 10-11 present Hananiah’s object lesson in which he took the yoke on Jeremiah’s neck and broke it stating that this is what the Lord would do to Nebuchadnezzar within two years. This action of Hananiah may have found strong acceptance by those who favored a rebellion by the coalition of countries mentioned in 26:3. Jeremiah, having accomplished his mission, left and went his own way.

Verses 12-17 say that after a short time the Lord told Jeremiah to return to Hananiah and deliver another message to him. The new message made use of the image of a yoke, but this time it would be an iron yoke placed on the neck of all the nations. Hananiah had broken a wooden yoke, but it would not be possible for him to break the iron yoke. The nations will serve Nebuchadnezzar who will even have control over the wild animals. To Hananiah Jeremiah said, “The Lord has not sent you, yet you have persuaded this nation to trust in lies.” His punishment was going to be his death in that year. Jeremiah predicted this in the fifth month, and verse 18 says

that Hananiah died in the seventh month. Some commentators believe that the exact months are stated as evidence of Jeremiah's true status as a prophet of the Lord as laid down in 28:9.

### **Correspondence with the exiles. 29:1-32**

Chapter 29 is unique in the book of Jeremiah. In some ways it reminds one of portions of the book of Ezra which records correspondence between Jerusalem and Babylon, although the subject matter in Jeremiah is entirely different. In review, we must remember that there were multiple invasions of Judah by the forces of Nebuchadnezzar. The first wave of exiles was carried away in about 598/597 B.C. when Jehoiakim was carried away with them. Jehoiachin was then placed on the throne in Jerusalem but after he had reigned only three months and ten days another Babylonian invasion took place also in 598/597 B.C. Jehoiachin and many captives were taken to Babylon and Zedekiah was made king in his place. Zedekiah rebelled against the Babylonians after he had reigned for nine year reign (597-588 B.C.) causing Nebuchadnezzar to invade again completely destroying the city of Jerusalem after a 2 year siege. He took additional captives to Babylon. Zedekiah had ruled a total of eleven years. The siege of Jerusalem ended and the city fell in 587/586 B.C. See Chapter VII for more details of this chronology. Not only did Babylon have trouble with rebellions in Judah, other states also created trouble for the Chaldeans. In addition Nebuchadnezzar had many internal political and military problems. Jeremiah indicates that a few Jews might have been involved in some of the internal unrest in Babylon, Jer. 29:20-22.

Chapter 29 begins by giving the text of the letter which Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to "the surviving elders among the exiles and the priests and the prophets, and all the other people." Many commentators believe that the fact that the elders are referred to as "the surviving elders" may imply that some elders had been executed or imprisoned. This may have been because of the internal troubles caused by the events alluded to in verses 21-22. Verse 2 is a parenthetical statement giving an approximate time of these events, 598/597 B.C. when Jehoiachin and the others were deported. This time indicator is considered by some scholars to have been a later editorial addition. (Bright, 1965, pp. 208-210.)

Verse 3 gives the names of some who were the couriers of the letter. It may be that Elasah the son of Shaphan was the brother of Ahikam who had supported Jeremiah when some wanted to imprison him and put him to death (26:24). Some commentators believe it is possible that Gemariah could have been the son of Hilkiah who was high priest during the time of Josiah's reforms but there is no solid evidence of this.

The contents of the letter(s) in verses 4-32 deal with Jeremiah's instructions the exiles about their conduct during the period of captivity. He also gives some warnings concerning past events and the continuation of false prophecies coming from the prophets. It is significant that Jeremiah again mentions (vs. 4) that it was the Lord who gave them over to the Babylonians rather than supposing this to be simply the results of Nebuchadnezzar's conquests.

In verses 4-9 Jeremiah instructs the people to go ahead and build their houses and try to live normal lives inasmuch as it was possible. They were to plant their gardens and eat the produce, to marry and have children, and to pray for the peace and prosperity of the city to which they had

been exiled. If the city thrives they will thrive. This action was quite contrary to what would have been expected. One would think that they would be told to pray for the downfall of Babylon. Furthermore they were not to listen to the prophets who told them that the exile would be short lived because those prophets had been prophesying lies. Instead, the people were to settle down for an extended period of exile. This instruction, along with some given in Ezekiel shows that some of the exiles had a considerable amount of freedom. The policy of the Babylonians was that generally the captives from conquered lands would work and produce goods which would help develop the economy of Babylon. Although the Exile was oppressive to some (Ps. 137) it was not so to all of them. Perhaps we can say that the main deprivation to some of the exiles was that they were away from the holy city of Jerusalem. Even though the people had gone into idolatry, they still thought of the city as a holy place. Canaan was still the Promised Land.

Verse 10 begins Jeremiah's statement of the divine purpose of God. Although the Babylonian Exile was in punishment for the sins of the people, the Lord has not forgotten or reneged on his promises to Israel. Ultimately the promise to Abraham and the various statements concerning the Messiah would all be fulfilled. However, a day of reckoning had to come for the people. They had to finally deal with the fact the false prophets had been wrong, the Lord's warnings through Jeremiah were true, and restoration to their land was part of God's plan. In addition, a general time period of seventy years had been prophesied by Jeremiah, 25:11-12 and 29:10. Once again the conditions of their return were laid down in verses 12-14. They were to call upon the Lord and seek him. He will be found by them and will bring them back from their captivity. Israelites from every nation to which they had been scattered would return to their land. These promises had always been God's plan for his people, but there were conditions of loyalty and fidelity to the Lord if the people were to continue occupying the land. The violation of their covenant obligations had been the reason for their exile.

Verses 15-19 deal with those who had been left in the land. At first it would seem that they had escaped the punishment of the Exile, but the Lord was not finished with them. They too had been violators of covenant, and had not listened to the messages of the prophets. Remember that they were among those who had been told not to rebel because in doing so they would bring on the destruction of the city and the temple. However, they ignored the warnings. They were compared to bad figs, reminiscent of the description in chapter 24 and they would be punished with sword, famine, and pestilence. Chapter 24 was addressed to Zedekiah, his officials, and the survivors, some of whom remained in the land and others who fled to Egypt. They too would receive their just punishment.

Verses 20-23 deal with two false prophets named Ahab and Zedekiah. These are not the well known kings of Israel and Judah respectively, but false prophets who would be punished by Nebuchadnezzar. Jeremiah specifically accuses them of prophesying lies and committing adultery. The king of Babylon would certainly not have found cause to execute them simply because of those offences, so we are probably within our rights to conclude that part of their false prophecies had to do with political offenses or inciting rebellion or predicting the fall of Babylon as previous false prophets had done. They were to be executed by being burned in the fire, 29:22. Thompson mentions that this was an ancient form of execution used by the Babylonians over a very long period of time. (Thompson, 1980, p. 549.) See Dan. 3 which tells of the three Hebrew



men Nebuchadnezzar had thrown into the fiery furnace. A curse formula would develop out of this incident.

### **Verses 24-32 are directed to Shemaiah.**

The Bible gives us no additional information about Shemaiah the Nehelamite or the place or tribe from which he came. Linguists tell us that in the Hebrew text the name Nehelam has the same consonants as the word for “dream.” Many commentators call attention to the possibility that Jeremiah is simply calling him “Shemaiah the dreamer” emphasizing that he is completely untrustworthy. In verse 8 Jeremiah had warned the people not to rely on prophets who were deceivers, dreamers, and liars. Verses 24-32 show that Shemaiah had sent a letter under his own name to the priests and the people remaining in Jerusalem. He names Zephaniah the son of Maaseiah as one of the priests. Zephaniah’s father’s name, Maaseiah, is the same name as the father of Zedekiah the false prophet mentioned in verse 21. This may mean that Zephaniah, the false prophet and Zedekiah, the false prophet were brothers but this is not certain. Also it is unclear why Jeremiah calls attention to the fact that Shemaiah had written in his own name.

Verses 24-28 show that Jeremiah’s letter offended Shemaiah and he reported this to Zephaniah, the temple caretaker, so that he would take legal action against Jeremiah placing him in prison or in stocks. In 21:1-2 King Zedekiah sent Pashhur and Zephaniah the priest to Jeremiah to inquire of the Lord. In 37:3 we have a similar incident where King Zedekiah sent Zephaniah to Jeremiah asking that he “pray to the Lord our God for us.” Earlier Pashhur was mentioned as the “chief officer in the temple of the Lord” and he placed Jeremiah in stocks overnight after the prophet had spoken about the coming destruction of Jerusalem, 19:14—20:2. No doubt the position which had been occupied by Pashhur is the position which Zephaniah now occupies since he is referred to as the one “in charge of the house of the Lord.” This gave him legal authority to act against those who violate temple protocol, in this case Jeremiah, “the madman.” By calling Jeremiah a madman posing as a prophet Shemaiah emphasizes the importance of placing the prophet under arrest in a similar way as Pashhur had done. A portion of Jeremiah’s message is included in the accusation – he had instructed the exiles to “build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they had produced” 29:28. This was completely contrary to the message of the false prophets.

In verses 29-32 Zephaniah the priest then read Shemaiah’s letter to Jeremiah. Jeremiah sent another letter to the exiles (vs. 31) replying to Shemaiah indictment. This, says Jeremiah, is the Lord’s message to the exiles. The Lord did not send Shemaiah and his message is filled with lies. He will therefore be punished and will have no one left among the people. He will not see the good things which the Lord will do for his people because he has preached rebellion against the Lord. This was similar to Jeremiah’s denunciation of Hananiah in 28:15-17.

Chapters 26-29 close with Jeremiah’s warnings to the people in exile and his constant attacks against the false prophets. False religious promises and hopes are often attractive to the populace when people are not adequately informed of truth. Jeremiah paid a heavy price to present God’s message. He was scorned, imprisoned, beaten, thrown into a muddy cistern, kidnapped, put out of the temple, and suffered many other injustices. He did this because he knew that truth ultimately triumphs, and loyalty to the Lord and his word has no substitute.

## **Chapter X**

### **Messages of Consolation**

#### **30:1—33:26**

#### **Introduction**

After King Jehoiachin cut up and burned Jeremiah's script Baruch, the prophet's scribe rewrote much of what Jeremiah had said and done (36:1—11:32). The earlier part of the book, chapters 1-29, is the rewritten material. It deals primarily with Jeremiah's interaction with various prophets, priests, kings, and the people, and his messages of warning to them. Many of the people, particularly the religious and political leaders, considered Jeremiah's messages severe, and the false prophets almost always took the side of the political and religious leaders rather than that of Jeremiah. As a result of these oracles and exhortations, Jeremiah was persecuted, imprisoned, beaten, thrown out of the temple, etc. There is always a glimmer of hope intertwined with these warnings.

The messages of consolation in chapters 30-31 deal with the consequences of the nation's sins and the hope – perhaps the reality – of restoration. A very pleasant picture of Judah's and Israel's future is painted by the prophet in beautiful, emotional, and descriptive poetic form. Great pain and sorrow are also described as Jeremiah balances the beauty of the future with the punishment of the present. In this strange combination of present grief and despair contrasted with future prosperity and security we are shown that violations of the covenant and the promise of a new covenant are keys to understanding God's work.

After Baruch had rewritten many of Jeremiah's very somber words and deeds (chapters 1-29) the prophet took a break from the general theme to offer hope and consolation to the people. Scholars have identified chapters 30-33 as messages of consolation or the book of consolations. Such titles give us a glimpse into the basic content of this portion of the book of Jeremiah.

This section, like much of the book, is a miscellaneous collection, is not in chronological order, and is rather indefinite in reference to dating some of the pericopes. Also in some cases it is not clear whether the prophet is speaking to the Northern Kingdom of Israel, to the whole nation, or just to the Kingdom of Judah. The Northern kingdom was taken into Assyrian Captivity more than a century before the south suffered its own demise, yet the North is still shown to be part of God's plan. There are competent scholars on almost every side of these issues described above. For us however the questions of chronology, addressees, and dating are not as important as the messages of the prophet. The beautiful poetic language of hope found in this section must be read in its entirety in order to bring together the dynamic images which the prophet has in mind.

#### **Write these words of distress and deliverance. 30:1-11**

On a number of occasions Jeremiah or Baruch were instructed to write things down either on a scroll (book) or in letter form. Verses 1-4 form a prose introduction to and brief summary of the poetic oracles to follow. Some commentators believe that Jeremiah now addresses a different audience than those of chapters 1-29. Scholars have argued on all sides of the questions of the

audience, date of writing, and the chronology of these oracles. Some argue that portions of chapters 30-33 are not genuine while others argue for the integrity and genuineness of the entire section. Many scholars believe that the introductory prose section was written by an editor who collected the various oracles in chapters 30-33.

These are predictions of things to come. They are sometime referred to as “salvation oracles.” Various prophets frequently used the phrase, “The days are coming” when speaking of coming events which the Lord promised. Sometimes they take place in a relatively short time – a few years – and at other times they are long range, reaching into years or a few centuries as in some of the Messianic and kingdom prophecies and the prophecy of the new covenant.

In verse 3 the expression is used that the Lord will “restore the fortunes of my people.” The phrase in Hebrew occurs in a variety of places and sometimes the word “restore” is translated to “return.” Its meaning is that things will be reversed. In the superscription both Judah and Israel are specified, no doubt because the writer intends that the readers know that God is speaking of the entire nation as he describes happier days for God’s people. Many of the people from the Assyrian captivity (722 B.C.) and those from the Babylonian Exile never returned to their homeland. Both New Testament and secular history, show that a large number of Jews (the Diaspora) lived in widely separated parts of the Roman Empire.

Verse 4 introduces the first oracle. “These are the word the Lord spoke concerning Israel and Judah.” Probably the first oracle (verses 5-11) was written shortly after 586 B.C. – the year of the fall of Jerusalem – since Jeremiah is addressing the exiles of Judah as well as Israel.

Verses 5-7 describe some of the sorrow, pain, and punishment of the exiled people. Vivid poetic imagery is used in this description. The pangs of a woman in labor are frequently used to describe pain and distress, so the writer pictures men holding their stomachs as a woman might do in delivery. This is descriptive of the powerlessness Israel and Judah must have felt while they were captives in foreign lands. In many cases the treatment of the captives was harsh and it was a time of trouble for Jacob (all Israel). There had never been anything like it before but again a ray of hope is injected; “but he will be saved out of it.” (30:7)

Verses 8-11 describe this hope. The yoke on their necks will be broken and the bonds will be torn away. The foreigners will no longer enslave God’s people, but they will serve the Lord their God. Their king will be David who will be raised up by the Lord. Jacob is told not to fear or be dismayed because the Lord will surely save them from their distant exile. Peace and security will be theirs in their own land again and nothing will cause them to fear.

There are some interesting elements to this prediction. In speaking of “David their king” there may be Messianic overtones, although the people of that day probably would not have interpreted it as such. No doubt they thought of it as the restoration of their kingdom with a descendant of David once again reigning in Jerusalem. Some have interpreted this as a prophecy of the restoration of fleshly Israel at the time of the second coming of Christ – an eschatological meaning. However the context does not allow this for it is obvious that he is speaking of the return of the people from their exile. The conditions of the promise of peace, tranquility, and security is found in verse 8. Instead of being slaves of their ruthless captors, they will serve the Lord who

loves them. Verse 11 states that the Lord will save them although they will be strongly disciplined with justice. The hostile nations around them will be destroyed. This was the promise of God to his people if they returned to the land to serve him faithfully.

### **Healing the wounds of captivity. 30:12-17**

Verses 12-15 describe the evil and guilt of the people in order to contrast God's mercy and love. In one of Jeremiah's lamentations he described his own hopelessness, as he saw it, in much the same way as he now describes the condition of Israel and Judah. See 15:10-18. Verse 12 begins with the words, "Your wound is incurable," and the description ends in verse 15 with the words, "Why do you cry out over your wound, your pain that has no cure?" These two expressions encapsulate the vivid description of the guilt of the people, and the Lord says that he has directed the punishment for their deeds. In verse 14, "All your allies have forgotten you," the word translated "allies" in the NIV is translated "lovers" in almost all other English versions. The LXX has *φίλος* (*philos*) which means "a dear friend." The word "lovers" in the Old Testament generally refers to those who are not faithful to their marriage vows, and John Bright says, "Judah's 'lovers' are her erstwhile allies, who have deserted her." (Bright, 1965, p. 279.) Both Egypt and Edom stand out as false friends. See Jer. 27:3, Hos. 5:13, Obad. 9-14 as examples of this.

Verses 16-17 again describe the hope as God's own purpose develops. In the NIV verse 16 begins with the word "but." However, this Hebrew word is translated "therefore" in most other English versions. The sense is that it is God's plan to work his will in and through the nations of the world, and "therefore" Israel's suffering has been part of this plan. Although Israel suffers, she will be avenged and healed. This being the case, the word "but" can show the contrast intended. So he says that those who devour you will be devoured and those who are your enemies will go into exile. Those who have plundered you will be plundered and all who have made spoil of you will be despoiled. The result of this execution of justice on their enemies would result in God's people being restored to health and their wounds being healed – justice and forgiveness meet in order to fulfill the Lord's purposes. All of this, both punishment and restoration is part of God's plan. Keown, *et al.* summarize it:

In these verses the Lord addresses people in a hopeless situation, suffering from a fatal injury but abandoned by the friends and allies from whom they expected to receive help. The divine word contains a paradoxical message of explanation and hope in terms of the Lord's own actions. Their abundant sins had resulted in the disciplining blow and grievous wound, which had come ultimately from the Lord. This suffering was also from the hand of human enemies who then taunt Zion because of her abandonment. In response, the Lord promises to act in mercy to deal with the enemies in the ways that they had dealt with Zion and to heal her incurable wounds.

(Keown, *et al.*, 1995, on CD.)

### **Restoration and judgment. 30:18—31:1**

Again Jeremiah contrasts the security and peace of the restoration with the pain of punishment. The writer's description of the restoration becomes more specific than it has been before. In

verse 18 God himself is speaking. The restoration of the tents of Jacob represents the restoration of Israel's political, economic, and covenant life. The word "tents" represents the tribes or clans of Jacob (Israel). In Num. 24:5-6 Balaam uses the word "tents" in describing the beauty of Israel's relationship with God. The Lord says that cities will be rebuilt and the palace will be restored. The word for palace can refer to a mansion or stronghold leading us to believe that the prophet is really describing the completeness of God's intended restoration.

When speaking of the rebuilding of the city on its ruins the idea describes a mound or a "tell." In the ancient Middle East when a city was destroyed succeeding generations would frequently rebuild on the ruins which were left. When the old foundations were still present, new structures would be erected. The rebuilding however usually came many years after the city's destruction. When a city had been destroyed and remained in ruins over many years sand and new vegetation would cover it up. Repeated destruction and rebuilding caused this to become a mound or a "tell." Palestine is filled with these tells, many of which have been excavated by archaeologists. One of the most famous is the tell (mound) of Megiddo. In 1925 an excavation by the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, led by J.H. Breasted uncovered twenty separate occupational levels at Megiddo dating back to the early part of the fourth millennium B.C. This shows how mounds grow through the centuries. (Pfeiffer, 1966, p. 375.)

Verses 19-20 describe the joy of the restoration. We see a strong contrast between this and the lamentations described earlier in the book. The restoration will be characterized by honor, songs of thanksgiving, growth of the nation, the pleasure of children, and God's protection against their enemies.

Verses 21-22 state that their rulers will come from among their own people instead of Israel being under the domination of a foreign power. The people will have a close relationship to the Lord and will be devoted to him. He Lord will once again be their God. Verses 23-24 remind Israel however that the winds of God's wrath will blow on the heads of the wicked. The false prophets would never admit this but Jeremiah is constantly aware of it. Israel and Judah had a difficult time accepting that principle but the Lord said, "In days to come you will understand this," 30:24. The block concludes with the words of 31:1, "'At that time,' declares the Lord, 'I will be the God of all the clans of Israel, and they will be my people.'"

### **Promises of the homecoming of Judah and Israel. 31:2-14**

This is a continuation of the Lord's description of the wonders of the restoration of God's people to their own land. The block divides itself into two separate but related sections. The first section, 31:2-6 appears to be addressed specifically to the Northern kingdom, and the second section, 31:7-14, appears to be addressed to the universal audience of all of the Hebrew people scattered through the nations of the world.

Verse 2 states that "the people who survive the sword will find favor in the desert." It will be shown in verses 5-6 that this section is addressed to the northern kingdom since the designations Samaria and Ephraim are used. Many commentators regard the phrase in verse 2, "the people who survived the sword will find favor (grace) in the desert" as referring to the Israelites at the time of the exodus from Egypt. As such they consider the return of the Israel from their Assyri-

an captivity as a sort of second exodus, perhaps in the same way as found in Hos. 2:14-15. (Thompson, 1980, pp. 566-567.) On the other hand, some believe this is speaking of those who survived the Assyrian invasion of the North in 722 B.C. when Sargon II deported Israel and scattered them throughout his Empire. (Harrison, 1973, on CD.)

Since chapter 31 has a great deal of emphasis on the idea of covenant we probably have to conclude that verse 3, "The Lord appeared to us in the past" is referring to the events at Mt. Sinai. Some believe that this is emphasized by the use of the words "love" and "faithfulness," two terms frequently used in referring to the Sinai covenant. Thompson says that the latter term occurs about 245 times in the Old Testament, mostly referring to a covenant or a treaty. (Thompson, 1980, p. 566.)

Verses 4-5 reiterate the bliss of restoration when the Lord says that his love has been everlasting. He promises to rebuild the nation again and bring back the music and joy of tambourines in the land. The tambourine or timbrel as sometime translated was a small hand type drum or rhythmic instrument used throughout the Middle East to accompany dancing and music. Along with the joy and rebuilding they will be able to return to their agriculture again, plant vineyards in Samaria, and eat the fruit of their work. The unity of the nation is also affirmed when the people of Ephraim (the northern kingdom) will cry out, "Let us go up to Zion, to the Lord our God."

John Bright believes that this oracle was given in the early days of Jeremiah's ministry, probably during the reign of Josiah. His reason is that Josiah had reached out to the people of the North (II Chron. 35:19) who were still in the land after the invasion of the Assyrians in 722 B.C. Josiah had invited them to come and celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem during the beginning of his reforms. (Bright, 1965, p. 281.)

Verses 7-14 form another oracle introduced by the words, "This is what the Lord says." The content is similar to that of verses 2-6 carrying the same theme of joy and celebration but it is somewhat amplified. The Lord tells the people to shout, sing, and praise God for his salvation of the remnant of Israel. The Lord will gather his people from the land of the north (Assyria and Babylon), and from the nations of the whole earth.

After the demise of Assyria, Babylon conquered the nations north of Israel, and they were considered the land to the north. See 4:5-6, 6:22-26, etc. The path which the exiles took in their trek to Babylon would have been to the north, then an easterly turn and movement into Mesopotamia and south to Babylon. No one will be left behind at the time of this glorious restoration to the land. The lame, the blind, the pregnant, and women in labor will all take part. So overwhelming will these events be that the people will weep for joy and repentance. A great throng will return and they will praise the Lord who will lead them to quiet waters on smooth paths so no one would stumble. The Lord will care for them because "I am Israel's father and Ephraim is my firstborn son." (31:9)

Verse 10 introduces the formula again, "Hear the word of the Lord O nations; proclaim it in distant coastlands." Once again the theme of gathering the scattered Israelites from the various nations is emphasized. The Lord will watch over his flock. Two important words occur in verse 11. "The Lord will *ransom* Jacob and *redeem* them from the hands of those who are stronger

than they.” These are words of salvation and forgiveness. The word “ransom” refers to the price being paid for the release and freedom of the one who has been captured or is in bondage. It was originally a legal commercial term. The word “redeem” was used frequently in family and religious matters. The first born of animals belonged to the Lord, but it may be redeemed by payment of prescribed sums of money. The first born human also belonged to the Lord but was redeemed by sacrifice and gift, Ex. 13:15. The word means to pay the price of freedom. When the Lord promised Israel that the nation would be freed from Egypt, he spoke of this by saying; “I will redeem you with an outstretched arm,” Ex. 6:6, II Sam. 7:23. The Lord is the *redeemer* of his people because he has paid the *ransom* for them.

When the people are restored to the land they will come to Zion with shouts of joy, bringing the bounty of the Lord – their grain, their flocks, and their oil. The Lord will turn their mourning into gladness, and bring joy in the place of sorrow. The people will be filled with the abundance and bounty of the Lord. In verse 14 he uses the expression, “I will satisfy the priests with abundance.” The word translated “abundance” is translated “fatness” in the NIV and in some other English versions. This is referring to the fat of the sacrifices which was burned on the altar. There will be no shortage of fat, and the priests will be completely satisfied with the Lord’s goodness.

### **Rachel weeping for her children and their return. 31:15-22**

In verse 15 we have the familiar introductory formula, “This is what the Lord says.” This is frequently used to introduce a new oracle, although it also appears as an extension of a present oracle. With this in view, some commentators believe verses 15-22 constitute a new oracle while others believe it is the extension of the message in 31:2-6. There were at least five different cities in Israel named Ramah. One was in Benjamin, one in Ephraim, one in Asher, one in Naphtali, and one in the Negeb. Since Rachel, the mother of Joseph and Benjamin is spoken of as weeping for her children it is generally thought that this was the city located in the tribe of Benjamin very near the border of Benjamin and Judah. The tribe of Ephraim is located on the north side of Benjamin. It is only about five miles (8 km.) north of Jerusalem. The oracle is therefore addressed to Northern Israel since the city of Ramah is the location of Rachel’s weeping. See also verses 18 and 20 where Ephraim is mentioned.

Rachel was the grandmother of Ephraim and Manasseh, the two sons of Joseph who were born in Egypt. She was the mother of Benjamin, the youngest son of Jacob. The tribe of Ephraim came to be a synonym and identification for the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Rachel is pictured weeping for her children because they have become apostate and now suffer the punishment of Assyrian captivity. The passage is used symbolically by Matthew when he speaks of Herod having the infants killed at the time of the birth of Jesus. (Matt. 2:17-18) This pericope however offers hope for Rachel’s children. They will return from their captivity and once again occupy the land. “Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears . . . they will return from the land of the enemy. So there is hope for your future,” 31:16-17.

In verses 18-19 the Lord speaks of Ephraim’s penitence and his confession. God had disciplined them as if the nation were an unruly calf needing severe treatment. The wayward son asks for restoration with the promise that he will return to the Lord. He confesses his shame and humiliation

because of the disgraceful life of his youth. In verse 20 the Lord affirms his love for Ephraim (Israel) by asking the rhetorical question, “Is not Ephraim my dear son, the child in whom I delight?” Then the strong affirmation of the Lord’s love, “My heart yearns for him; I have great compassion for him.” The phrase “my heart” is a vivid expression which literally says that “the Lord’s stomach churns” when he considers the return of Ephraim, the son whom he loves.

Verses 21-22 climax this pericope when the Lord declares that the road signs leading back to the land will be posted. The road which once led to captivity will now lead back to their God-given homeland. It is a time to rejoice as the people are invited to return to their towns and villages. A revolutionary event is taking place which is difficult to express. In a society which gave prominence to men rather than women, this revolutionary idea is expressed almost as a proverbial saying; “A woman will surround a man.”

### **The restoration of Judah. 31:23-30**

The previous section has dealt with Israel but now the prophet turns to speak of Judah. It is important to remember that Jeremiah is speaking of the restoration of the divided and scattered nation into its own land. The North has been in Assyrian captivity and the South was (or will be) in Babylonian captivity. God’s purpose from the very beginning of the conquest of Canaan was to have faithful Israel occupy the land until his ultimate promise to the forefathers was fulfilled. As Christians we understand that this is fulfilled in Christ. However, it is certain that Israel did not have a picture of the Messianic mission involving a dying and rising Savior as shown in the New Testament. Because of the infidelity of his people, God determined to punish them with the captivities but he also promised to bring them back to the land.

Verses 23-30 are basically prose, and verse 31-34 return to poetry. It has many of the characteristics of 31:7-14. We must keep in mind the differences in dealing with these two genres of literature. Again the prophet pictures a nation which is faithful to the Lord. He gives a rather lengthy introduction saying that these are the words of the Lord. He then begins the oracle by speaking directly of the return of the people from captivity and the beauty of Jerusalem “when I bring them back from captivity.” The towns will be occupied and the Lord will bless this “righteous dwelling” as a “sacred mountain.” Everyone will again go to his work as a farmer or shepherd. This is a picture of a tranquil peaceful life of a restored faithful nation returning from captivity. In verse 26 Jeremiah says he awoke from his sleep. This is a confusing statement in many ways because it is not the usual way that Jeremiah speaks of his revelations from God.

Verses 27-30 give a sort of composite picture of the activities of the Lord as he punishes and blesses Israel and Judah. The audience of “The Book of Consolation” certainly knows the history of God’s punishment as well as his promises. The expression, “The days are coming” is thought by some to be primarily an eschatological expression, but it is not limited to that. In 7:20 and 21:6 the Lord had spoken of the destruction of both man and beast, and here in 31:27-28 he speaks of the replanting and reseeding of both man and beast. The land which had been left desolate and uninhabited will be repopulated by both man and beast, and agriculture will again flourish. In 1:10 Jeremiah was told that he would be instrumental in announcing the uprooting and planting of nations. There are seven infinitives used in verse 28 to describe the past and future work of the Lord. In verse 29 he recites an ancient proverb which says that the chil-



dren suffer the consequences of the sins of the fathers – “The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” Ezek. 18:2, which gives the same quotation, comes after Jeremiah’s writing. Some believe that Ezekiel’s source was Jeremiah but the proverb certainly predated both of these prophets.

This brings up the question of individual responsibility. Frequently the sins of Manasseh were brought up as cause of the punishment of Judah although the infidelity of the whole nation is generally shown to be the reason. In the history of both Israel and Judah there is an interesting phenomenon of corporate (community) and individual responsibility. It cannot be denied that the Lord treated the goodness as well as the sins of the nation in a corporate manner, and the innocent suffered with the guilty in God’s punishment of the nation. On the other hand the guilty benefited along with the righteous in God’s blessings on the nation. Although this might not seem to be strict justice, it is an undeniable fact that this is the way life works. The moral responsibility of one’s own actions however remains an individual matter.

Jeremiah says that this speech pattern will change. Each person will be responsible for his own sins and will suffer for his own wrongdoing – “whoever eats sour grapes, his own teeth will be set on edge,” 31:30. This is probably based on the fact that within the nation as God intended in its restoration to the land, the righteousness of the people would result in prosperity, peace, and security. However, those who did wrong would be held responsible for the wrong they did. There would therefore not be the same strong fallout of evil consequences as was true in the apostate nation.

### **The new covenant. 31:31-34**

Verses 31-34 describe God’s overall plan for his people. He will make a new covenant with Israel and Judah which will not be like the old covenant. The question naturally arises concerning the identity of this new covenant from three points of view; Jeremiah’s original audience, in later Judaism, and finally in Christianity. Each of these groups has its own interpretation of the passage. Many commentators have called this one of the most important statements in the book. Philip Hyatt makes this interesting statement. “This passage presents the most important single teaching of Jeremiah, where his religious thought reaches its climax. It is one of the mountain peaks of the O.T. and came to have great importance in the N.T.” (Hyatt, 1956, p. 1037.)

Formerly God had made a covenant with Abraham and renewed it to Isaac and Jacob. In the Jewish mind however, the Mt. Sinai covenant always stood out as the primary covenant of the Lord with his people, Israel. The people were unfaithful to this covenant and God punished them in various ways, finally by means of the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities. The descendants of those who experienced these captivities formed the audience to whom Jeremiah addressed his message. Notice that the Lord does not give a timeline for the fulfillment of this, but simply says that “The time is coming,” 31:31.

How would that original audience have seen this passage in its context? The first thing we must keep in mind is that the Israel-Judah community of Jeremiah’s day would not have considered this new covenant to include the Gentile world, so we can dismiss that possible interpretation. To reinforce this it is noteworthy that this is the only place in the Old Testament where a “new

covenant” is mentioned although Ezekiel 37:15-28 has some similar language referring to a “covenant of peace” which God will make with his people.

Neither Israel nor Judah had any reason to anticipate another covenant so it would be very difficult to suppose that in this prophecy they would have seen the promise of a new Messianic covenant and its universal message as Christians saw it in the environment of the New Testament. The Jewish Encyclopedia gives the following interpretation: “The idea is indeed the most germinal of all religious conceptions, for when Jeremiah utters the profoundest sentiment of the Old Testament, that the Law of God should be written upon His people's hearts, the promise is called ‘a **new covenant.**’” (*Jewish Encyclopedia*, [www.jewishencyclopedia.com/jeremiah](http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/jeremiah).) It appears from this that contemporary Orthodox Judaism sees this new covenant as a sort of “heart religion” coming in place of a “legal religion.”

On the other hand, the Dead Sea Scrolls revealed that the Qumran Community considered itself the New Israel, the remnant spoken of by the prophets. They believed that the new covenant of Jer. 31:31-34 was God’s special treatment of their Community. Concerning this James C. VanderKam says, “The remnant with whom the new covenant was concluded considered themselves the true Israel. The people who lived in and around Qumran believed firmly that they were part of that remnant raised by God to be a plant of righteousness and truth. They enacted a ceremony of covenant renewal annually, at the festival of Weeks.” (VanderKam, 1994, p. 111.)

Generally speaking, Orthodox Judaism takes the position that God kept his covenant promises but Israel did not. Therefore the covenant was broken, and in Jer. 31:31-34 God promises that he will make a new covenant with them. Many Orthodox Jews believe that this will be fulfilled in the messianic age, but not as Christians view it as fulfilled in Christ. However this is not to be another covenant which would take away the Mt. Sinai covenant but rather, it is a renewal of the Mt. Sinai covenant. The newness of the covenant is seen in the fact that it will be written on the hearts of the people rather than on stone tablets. We must look at the passage in its historical context and remember the audience to whom it was originally addressed. For additional information concerning the position of contemporary Judaism see the website cited above.

Verses 31-33 state five important items. First the Lord declares that “The time is coming.” No indication is given concerning just when this time would be. Without doubt the original audience would have believed that the context demands that this refers to the time of the restoration following the Exile. In previous chapters Jeremiah had said a great deal about the tranquility, peace, and security of restoration of the people to the land. Second, he says that this would be a new covenant which would not be like the covenant made with their forefathers at the time of the exodus, referring to the Mt. Sinai covenant. Third, he says that the Mt. Sinai covenant had been broken because the people violated its demands. They had agreed to keep “everything the Lord has said,” (Ex. 19:8) but they failed to do so. God’s intention was stated in Ex. 19:5-6: “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” See Jeremiah’s description of the broken covenant in 11:1-17. It is noteworthy that at this time the Mt. Sinai covenant is not referred to as the “old covenant.” That is a New Testament expression which occurs only in II Cor. 3:14. However, see Heb. 8:7, 8:13, 9:1, 9:15, 9:18, and 12:24 where similar though not identical language is used. Jeremiah’s audience, having

been under the Mt. Sinai covenant for over six hundred years, probably would not have considered this new covenant to constitute a removal of the Sinai covenant. Fourth, the Lord mentions that this new covenant would include both Israel and Judah, no doubt referring to a reuniting of the divided nation. See also 3:18 and 50:4-5. Fifth, the laws would be put in their minds and be written on their hearts. No doubt this is in contrast to the laws being written on stone or in the book of the Law. The implication is that the people would obey out of a nobler motivation than simply keeping a law. They would love the Lord and their obedience would be by choice rather than obligation because his laws would be within them rather than external to them.

Verse 34 states that the priests, prophets, and teachers would no longer need to instruct the people to “know the Lord” because all would know the Lord from the least to the greatest. This seems to declare that when the new covenant is given there will be no necessity for instruction for all will have God’s laws written within their own minds and hearts. The expression “know me,” vs. 34, probably carries not simply cognitive knowledge but the intimacy which characterizes close and true relationships. In this intimate relationship, the people’s sins of the past, their apostasy, their immorality, and all other wicked behavior will be forgiven and never remembered. As Jeremiah’s original audience views this proclamation there can be little doubt that they envisioned a time of restoration to their land and the ultimate blessings of the Lord to attend them perpetually.

As Christians we believe that this refers to the covenant of Christ as the writer of Hebrews applies it, Heb. 8:8-12. It is a Messianic era prediction. When Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper “he took the cup and offered it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you. This is the blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.’” Matt. 26:27-28. See also Mk. 14:24. In the KJV and NKJV the word **καινος** (*kainos*) “new” is inserted in the reference in both Matthew and Mark, but the manuscript evidence for this addition is very late. However in Luke and also in I Corinthians Jesus says, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood,” Lk. 22:20 and I Cor. 11:25. The manuscript evidence is excellent for the reading in Luke and I Corinthians. The expression “new covenant” is also used in II Cor. 3:6, Heb. 8:8, Heb. 9:15, and Heb. 12:24.

### **Israel’s duration and the rebuilding of Jerusalem. 31:35-40**

This block is divided into two smaller sections, 31:35-37 and 31:38-40, which have a relationship to each other. The duration of Israel as a nation is followed by the rebuilding of Jerusalem, its most important city.

Verse 35 extols the all powerful character of the Lord who gives light to the sun, moon and stars and the one who stirs up the sea as its waves roar. Since the ancients placed much emphasis on the names of their deities, there is the insertion of a familiar statement, “the Lord Almighty is his name.” Using his power as a point of departure, the Lord’s next statement is that only if this power vanishes will there come a time when the Lord will not have Israel as his own nation. Verse 37 reiterates this principle by stating that only if the heavens can be measured and the foundations of the earth discovered will God cast off Israel or reject his descendants. In the principles of debate, this is referred to as an *argumentum ad absurdum*, that is, an argument resulting

in an absurdity. It is a bizarre impossibility to even think that the Lord could lose his power over the universe. It is just as impossible that the Lord would forsake or disown Israel.

In verse 38 the style changes to prose as the Lord introduces the next pericope by declaring that “The days are coming” when Jerusalem will be rebuilt. Because this has the tone of a nationalistic statement, some commentators, such as Hyatt and Couturier reject its genuineness. (Hyatt, 1956, p. 1041, Couturier, 1968, p. 328.) The new dimensions of the city are described by using some known landmarks – Kidron valley, the Tower of Hananel (Neh. 3:1), the Corner Gate (II Kgs. 14:13) and the Horse Gate (Neh. 3:28) – and others which are not identifiable – Gareb and Goah. Dead bodies had been strewn in the valley of Hinnom which connected to the Kidron valley, but all of this would become holy to the Lord, and the city would never be uprooted or demolished.

When considering the statements in chapters 30-31 it is important that we remember that the Lord is painting a picture of the ideal restoration of Israel and Judah. The desire of the Lord is that the people live lives of holiness, and the hope of restoration incorporates this hope of the Lord. Unfortunately this is not what took place. Although idolatry was not the besetting sin or the returning exiles, there were other sins which invaded their lives. Moving through the remainder of Old Testament history into the Intertestamental Period and finally into the New Testament we find all sorts of internal conflicts, civil war, elevating tradition to the level of the Law, gross hypocrisy, and the ultimate rejection of the Messiahship of Jesus. In the mind of the Lord, the perpetuity of Israel and Judah was always contingent on their fidelity to God. Unfortunately this fidelity was breached during much of their history.

### **Jeremiah’s land purchase at Anathoth. 32:1-15**

Chapters 32-33 change the mood of the “Book of Consolation.” It is more a story of the activities of Jeremiah within which there are the rays of hope, peace and security. This section is almost entirely prose, with two short passages of poetry, 33:11 and 33:15-16.

Chapter 32 is the story of Jeremiah buying a field in his home city of Anathoth. The purchase becomes a symbol of God’s promise to restore the people to their land. The chapter falls into two general divisions. First is the story of the purchase, 32:1-15, and the second is Jeremiah’s dialogue with the Lord including his prayer, 32:17-44.

Verse 1 begins by setting the date of the events about to be described. It was in the tenth year of King Zedekiah which was the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon. Zedekiah’s entire reign was only eleven years, so this was just prior to the end of his reign and the destruction of the city of Jerusalem. The siege of Jerusalem began in the ninth year of the reign of Zedekiah and the city fell in the eleventh year of his reign. See II Kgs. 25:1-2 and Jer. 39:1. This means that the events of chapter 32 took place in 588/587 B.C. Since there were differences in the way the Babylonians and Israelites counted the time of a king’s reign, there may be some discrepancy in the chronology.

Verses 2-5 give the details of why Jeremiah was in prison. Basically he had prophesied the demise of Jerusalem and the end of Zedekiah's reign. The king of Babylon would take Zedekiah to Babylon as a prisoner. Since these words did not suit the king he imprisoned Jeremiah.

In verses 7-15 a property transaction is described. Jeremiah's cousin, Hanamel, who owns property in Anathoth apparently is about to lose his property to a creditor so he appeals to Jeremiah to redeem it. In verse 8 Jeremiah mentions that the Lord had told him that this would happen. In Lev. 25:25-31 the Law provided that the nearest of kin had the obligation to redeem such property so it would remain in the family. Jeremiah agreed to this and the proper legal documentation was prepared and the money was exchanged. He paid seventeen shekels of silver for the land. A shekel was about two-fifths of an ounce, so Jeremiah paid about seven ounces of silver for the land. Various details of the transaction are given in verses 9-15. Although we do not know much about the legal requirements of that day concerning transfer of property, Thompson mentions some of the practices of the Elephantine colony in Egypt in the fifth century B.C. A copy of the transfer was written on papyrus which was then rolled up and sealed. Another copy was attached to the scroll so it could be consulted without breaking the seal. A similar practice was followed in Mesopotamian countries. (Thompson, 1980, p. 589.) Verses 11-15 tell how the copies were given to Baruch in the presence of Hanamel and witnesses and placed in a clay jar for safe keeping. This was a common practice in handling important writings so that they would be preserved. In the first century B.C. and first century A.D. the Qumran Community hid the Dead Sea Scrolls in this way when they feared an attack from the Romans.

This action was symbolic of the restoration of the people to the land when business and commercial or agricultural activities would be resumed. Jeremiah had been put out of his family and the people of his home town of Anathoth had turned against him and wanted to kill him. However when the crisis of poverty and the threat of loss of family land threatened a kinsman, he turned to Jeremiah for help. Jeremiah agreed to redeem the land so that it could stay in the family. The symbolism here is vivid and important when we consider the plight of Israel and Judah. They had put the Lord out of their lives, had become worshippers of Baal, Molech, and other gods, and had violated their covenant with the Lord in almost every conceivable way. When the threat of total loss came they turned to the Lord for help and he redeemed them from the captivity.

### **Jeremiah's prayer and the Lord's answer. 32:16-44**

Jeremiah's prayer begins with verse 17. The first part of the prayer, verses 17-25, extol the power and activity of the Lord in the past. A variety of familiar deeds are briefly alluded to, and in verse 23 he speaks of the violations of the people and the present siege of Jerusalem. The battle equipment is being brought against the walls and the armies of the Chaldeans are about to destroy the city. God's mighty acts in the history of Israel, his protection of the people, and now their punishment form parts of his prayer. Jeremiah expresses his own bewilderment at the Lord's instructions for him to buy the land. In verse 25 it seems that Jeremiah, although he has spoken frequently about the restoration of the people to the land, now faces what he feels in an absurdity in purchasing the plot of land from his cousin at the very time when Jerusalem is being attacked.

Verses 26-44 give the Lord's reply to Jeremiah's prayer and the expression of his bewilderment. The Lord begins by asking a rhetorical question "Is there anything too hard for me?" It is strange that in verse 17 of Jeremiah's prayer the prophet had just affirmed that "Nothing is too hard for you." Perhaps in this we see some of the living contradictions with which Jeremiah and all the rest of us have to live.

Verses 28-29 reaffirm what Jeremiah had already said in his prayer in verse 25, *i.e.* the city will be given over to the king of Babylon. The city will be burned down and the houses where they had burned incense to Baal will be burned down as well. Verses 30-35 give vivid but familiar descriptions of the sins of the people stating that they will suffer the wrath of the Lord.

Once again hope is offered by the Lord, 32:36-44. Although Jeremiah had rightly said that sword, famine, and pestilence will play their part in the final defeat of Jerusalem, this will not be the end of Israel. "I will surely gather them from all of the lands where I banish them in my furious anger," 32:37. The Lord then affirms that they will be brought back in safety, and "I will be their God." Various other familiar statements are made concerning the purity of their lives and singleness of their hearts when they return to the land. In verses 39-41 a number of strong promises are made by the Lord. He will make an everlasting covenant with the people, he will never stop doing good for them, and he will "assuredly plant them in this land with all my heart and soul," 32:41. The mention of an everlasting covenant reminds us of the statements in 31:31-34 concerning the new covenant. Much of what is said in 31-34 is repeated in principle in verses 38-41.

Verses 42-44 say that just as surely as the Lord has brought calamity on the people for their sins, he will return them to their land again. Jeremiah had said that the land would be desolate and waste but the Lord now assures him that once again it will be productive, people will carry on their agricultural pursuits, commercial enterprises will thrive, and the fortunes of the towns and villages all through the land will be restored.

### **The restoration of Judah. 33:1-13**

Chapter 33 links itself to the preceding chapters by stating that its events took place while Jeremiah was still a prisoner in the courtyard of the guard. The chapter divides itself into two sections. Verses 1-13 deal with the restoration of Judah while verses 14-26 deal with the dynasty of David and the work of the priests in this restoration. Since there are three separate introductory clauses in the first section many scholars believe that these are three distinct units. However, all three look beyond the devastation of the land to the restoration of the people and their fidelity to the Lord.

The introductory statement in the first section is rather lengthy. In verses 1-2 the Lord refers to himself as the one who made the earth, formed it and established it, reminding us again that "the Lord is his name." In verse 3 he challenges the people to call on him and he will tell them great and unsearchable things which they do not now know. Verses 4-5 describe the destruction which will come to the houses of Jerusalem and the many people who will be killed in their fight against the Babylonians. The siege of the city meant that it would be filled with the bodies of the dead. The people had abandoned God and God had abandoned them for a period of time.

Archaeological excavations have exposed the destruction of houses and other buildings in Jerusalem and other areas of Judah. Thompson refers to some of this as reported by Kathleen Kenyon in her book, *Digging up Jerusalem*. (Thompson, 1980, p. 598.) W.F. Albright refutes the claims of what he calls “radical critics of biblical history” by referring to the work of a number of archaeologists who describes the vast devastation of many of the towns of Judah. Concerning the excavations in Judah he says:

The results are uniform and conclusive: many towns were destroyed at the beginning of the sixth century B.C. and never again occupied; others were destroyed at that time and partly reoccupied at some later date; still others were destroyed and reoccupied after a long period of abandonment, marked by a sharp change of stratum and by intervening indications of use for non-urban purposes. There is not a single known case where a town of Judah proper was continuously occupied through the exile period.

(Albright, 1960, pp. 141-143.)

In verses 6-13 the tone is reversed and once again Jeremiah offers God’s hope for the people. The Lord will bring health and healing back to the people and they will enjoy abundant peace and security. Judah and Israel will be reunited and the nations will be rebuilt as before. They will be cleansed from their sins and forgiven of their rebellion. The city of Jerusalem will bring renown, honor, joy, and praise to the Lord. God will provide prosperity and peace for his people. The nations will hear of the Lord’s name again and know the good things he has done. Verses 10-13 continue the general theme asking if it had been said that there were no people or animals in the place. The Lord will restore all of this with the joy of brides and bridegrooms and the voices of singing. They will bring offerings to the house of the Lord who has promised restoration: “‘For I will restore the fortunes of the land as they were before’ says the Lord,” 33:11.

### **Restoration of the dynasty of David and the Levitical priests. 33:14-26**

Verses 14-16 deal with the restoration of the dynasty of David, the righteous Branch. Verses 17-22 deal with the priesthood and the assurance of the Lord’s fidelity to the covenant. This theme is concluded in verses 23-26. Looking at this from a Christian perspective we see many allusions to Christ and the messianic age as taught in the New Testament. What would Jeremiah’s original audience have seen in these oracles?

The familiar phrase “The days are coming” is used to introduce verses 14-18. God promises to fulfill the promises he has made to Israel and Judah. He then refers to the “righteous Branch” from David. Probably to the people of Jeremiah’s day this meant the reinstituting of the dynasty of David, the reuniting of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and the restoration of the people to their land. Jerusalem will be known as “The Lord Our Righteousness,” a symbolic statement of the new and complete fidelity of the people to the Lord. This goes back to the statement by Nathan to David concerning the perpetuity of his dynasty, II Sam. 7:12-16.

Not only will the Branch of David be reinstituted but the Levitical (Aaronic) priesthood will be reinstituted and function as God intended. They will continually offer the sacrifices and minister

in the house of the Lord. During the Divided Kingdom period the northern kingdom under Jeroboam I instituted a non-Levitical priesthood, and changed a number of the practices required by the Law. He even set up golden calves at Bethel and Dan. See I Kgs. 12:25-33. Jeremiah had been critical of the priests in his own day, but in 33:17-22 he speaks of the Levitical priests faithfully carrying out their duties at the time of restoration. During the Intertestamental Period a great deal of trouble arose concerning the legitimacy of the priesthood because some of the priests were not of the Aaronic (Levitical) order.

Finally, in verses 23-26 the Lord states that his determined loyalty to his covenant with the united kingdoms of Israel and Judah is as sure as his covenant with the day and night. This is a symbolic statement saying that just as sure as day follows night and night follows day, just that surely will he never desert the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The future is assured, but is this assurance unconditional? We must not overlook the fact that God's blessings in the restoration were always contingent upon the people's loyal fidelity to the covenant of the Lord. Historically we can see that they failed in this as is demonstrated in the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, and Zechariah where there is a constant appeal for the people to turn back to the Lord. During the Intertestamental Period and in the New Testament we see the failure of the people to accept the directives of the Lord. Once again they violated the covenant.



## **Chapter XI**

### **Zedekiah and Jehoiakim**

#### **34:1—36:32**

#### **Introduction**

In the previous section we looked at chapters 32-33 which describe events during the tenth year of Zedekiah, Judah's final king. Those events took place about 588/587 B.C. and were primarily descriptive of the behavior of the people, the reasons for the captivity, and God's intended plans for the peace of the people who were restored to the land. We now begin with chapter 34 which returns to more biographical and autobiographical information. The picture in this section begins during the reign of Zedekiah at the time of the siege of Jerusalem. It therefore took place after the time of chapters 32-33, but very close to those events. Jerusalem fell in the eleventh year of Zedekiah's reign.

This was a period of great stress as the armies of Babylon surrounded the city of Jerusalem and placed it under a two year siege. In 35:11 we see that the Syrian (Aramean) armies had joined in the siege and Ps. 137:7 speaks of the participation of the Edomites. Chapter 34 does not indicate just how long that siege had been going on when Jeremiah brought his message to Zedekiah but II Kgs. 24:18—25:7 gives the account of the capture of Zedekiah. Chapters 35 and 36 of Jeremiah are out of chronological order, giving an account of events which took place earlier during the reign of Jehoiakim, the son of Josiah. At that time Egypt dominated portions of Palestine and Pharaoh Neco selected Eliakim to be king in place of Jehoahaz and changed Eliakim's name to Jehoiakim. See II Kgs. 23:31-35.

#### **Jeremiah's first message to Zedekiah. 34:1-7**

Verse 1 introduces the situation by saying that troops from Babylon and other states of the empire were fighting against Jerusalem and its surrounding towns. The cities of Lachish, about 25 miles (40.2 km.) southwest of Jerusalem, and Azekah, about 18 miles (29 km.) west and slightly south of Jerusalem were specified as fortified cities which were holding out against the Babylonians (34:7). One by one these southern towns were invaded by the Babylonians and most of them were demolished. Various archaeological excavations have shown the devastation of many of those towns. See Chapter X, "Messages of Consolation" for archaeological information on excavations in southern Judah.

Verse 2 begins to give us the message which Jeremiah was to deliver to Zedekiah. In II Kgs. 24:18-20 we have the statement that Zedekiah was an evil king who rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar bringing on the final Babylonian invasion. Jeremiah had met Zedekiah on a number of occasions, but the king refused to accept the prophet's message of doom for Jerusalem. Instead he seems to have been guided in the past by the optimistic messages of the false prophets we have met in the earlier chapters of the book.

Verses 3-7 tell us that Jeremiah's message was that the Lord would turn Jerusalem over to the Babylonians who would destroy it and Nebuchadnezzar would take King Zedekiah to Babylon. He would speak eye to eye with the king of Babylon but Jeremiah assures Zedekiah that he

would not die by the sword but would have a peaceful death and be honored by his people just as his predecessors had been honored. The expression of a “peaceful death” probably refers to the fact that he would not be killed in battle. At first, Zedekiah heeded Jeremiah’s warnings but he later defied the Lord and suffered the consequences. See II Kgs. 24:20 and Jer. 21:7-10, 29:21-22, and 39:4-7.

### **The treacherous treatment of the slaves. 34:8-22**

This section says that a number of the people of Judah held slaves who were their own countrymen. Verses 8-11 state that these slaves were released rather early in the siege. This came in the form of a covenant, 34:8-9. Verses 15-16 tell us that this covenant (their promises or vows concerning the slaves) was made in the “house of the Lord,” the temple. Verses 12-16 describe some of the conditions of slavery among the Israelites as prescribed by the Law of Moses. See also Ex. 21:2-6 and Deut. 15:12-18. Slaves were to be released every seventh year referred to as the sabbatical year. In that year the land was to lie fallow and not to be cultivated, Ex. 23:10-11, Lev. 25:3-7. In Deut. 15:1-4 the cancellation of debts is described.

The siege of Jerusalem was interrupted when the armies of Pharaoh marched out of Egypt to help protect Jerusalem (Jer. 37:7-8). During part of this era Egypt dominated Judah and it was in Egypt’s own national interests that they attempted to protect Jerusalem. The Babylonians lifted the siege of Jerusalem in order to chase the Egyptians back to their own country. It was probably during this intermission that the slave owners retook their slaves, presumably because they thought that the siege was over even though the Lord said the siege would be resumed. See 34:21-22. The Lord reminds the people of the covenant he made with them at Sinai, and the fact that their forefathers had violated it. Now, the people in Jeremiah’s day were doing the same thing, 34:14-16, and they would suffer the consequences.

It appears that this event has a strong symbolic meaning. Israel had been redeemed from the slavery of Egypt by the intervention of the Lord, and their new freedom was authenticated by the Sinai covenant which they promised to keep. Repeatedly they violated the solemn covenant and they had to suffer the consequence of that betrayal of trust. Now the people of Jeremiah’s day had made a solemn covenant with the debtor slaves that they would be released in compliance with the Law of Moses. However, when they thought that the threat of the siege was removed they violated their solemn promise and enslaved their servants once again. This breach of trust would now be punished just as the Lord had punished their forefathers.

In addition, there is strong sarcasm in verse 17 where the Lord says that just as they had declared “freedom for the slaves” but then enslaved them again, so the Lord was declaring “freedom for you.” However this freedom was not freedom to live but it was “freedom” to die by the sword, plague, and famine which was a familiar phrase in the book of Jeremiah. Their violation of the covenant they had made with the slaves was a terrible sin, and they would have to pay the consequences.

Verses 17-20 describe a custom practiced among some ancient nations and individuals of the Middle East dating back at least as far as Abraham. The practice is found in the Bible only here in Gen. 15:10-11 but it is described in fair detail in non-biblical texts. Those who entered into a

treaty or covenant sometimes bound themselves to each other by dividing a sacrificial animal into two parts and laying the parts opposite each other. The parties to the covenant would then pass together between the parts pledging themselves to abide by its terms. The implication in non-biblical texts is that they pledged to each other that if one broke the terms of the covenant he should suffer the same fate as the sacrificial animal had suffered. Phillip Hyatt refers to a similar practice in a treaty or covenant made between Ashurnirari V (754-745 B.C.), king of Assyria and Mati-ilu, an official of Bit-Agusi, a very small area of Syria near Carchemish. A ram was beheaded and Mati-ilu held the head in his hands. The treaty said, ““This head is not the head of a ram, but it is the head of Mati-ilu . . . If Mati-ilu sins against this oath, then as the head of this ram was cut off, so will the head of Mati-ilu be cut off.”” (Hyatt, 1956, p. 1058.) This is not exactly the same as Jer. 34:17-22 specifies, but there are important parallel ideas and other similarities which may give us some insight into the text of Jeremiah. The design is to demonstrate the gravity of the covenant made by the people of Judah. Verse 18 reinforces this idea by saying that the ones who violated the covenant which they had made with the slaves and with God will be treated “like the calf they cut in two and then walked between its pieces.” They would be handed over to their enemies who want to kill them, and their dead bodies will become food for the birds of the air and wild beasts. The whole idea of a dead body becoming food for birds and beasts was the height of sacrilege and curse among the Israelites.

Verses 21-22 define the curse these people had brought upon themselves and the nation. Zedekiah the king and his officials will be given over to the armies of the king of Babylon. Notice that in verse 21 Jeremiah calls attention to the fact that the Babylonians had withdrawn but the Lord would “give the order” to bring them back and continue the siege. They will fight against Jerusalem, take the city, and burn it down. The Lord then says, “I will lay waste the towns of Judah so no one can live there,” 34:22.

### **Jehoiakim and the Recabites. 35:1-19**

Chapter 34 dealt with events during the reign of Zedekiah, Judah’s last king. The prophet now turns back to the time of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah who had been placed on the throne of Judah by Pharaoh Neco. This is used by Jeremiah to symbolize the contrast between the fidelity of the Recabites and the infidelity of the people of Judah in general. The word “Recabites” is frequently spelled “Rechabites.”

The exact date of this encounter is not stated, but verse 11 says that the Recabites came up to Jerusalem at the time of the invasion of the land by the Chaldeans and Arameans. This fits well into the timeframe and events described in II Kgs. 24:2-4. An encounter between the Egyptians and Babylonians took place in 601 B.C. which is not mentioned in the Old Testament text but is found in the Babylonian Chronicle. (Freedman, 1961, pp. 118-119.) Heavy casualties were experienced by both sides and neither country could really declare victory. This probably means that the incident in chapter 35 took place in the early part of Jehoiakim’s reign, or about 601 B.C. The Recabites left their tents in the southern part of Judah for the protection of the fortified city of Jerusalem.

They were nomads who refrained from wine, would not cultivate grapes, did not engage in any agricultural activities, and never built houses but lived in tents, vss. 6-7. Refraining from grapes

and wine makes us think of the Nazirite vow (Num. 6:1-5) but there is nothing else to make us conclude that the Recabites were Nazirites. The important principle in this story is their strict fidelity to their vow begun by Recab, the father of the clan, and passed down through about two hundred forty-one years (842 until 601 B.C.).

Relatively little is known about the origin or history of the Recabites. They appear in the genealogical lists associated with the Kenites in I Chron. 2:55 and 4:11-12 but there is no special significance attached to them. According to 35:6 they descended from Jonadab (Jehonadab), the son of Recab who was an ally of Jehu when he conducted his purge of the temple of Baal, II Kgs. 10:15-17 in 842 B.C. Since they were nomads and had strict dietary and occupational rules, they are thought by some commentators to have advocated an ascetic lifestyle

Verse 2 tells us that Jeremiah was to invite the Recabites to a side room of the temple where he was to offer them wine to drink. In verses 3-4 we have the names of Jaazaniah, the son of Jeremiah the son of Habazziniah, Hanan the son of Igdaliah “the man of God,” and Maaseiah the son of Shallum. None of these individuals is named elsewhere in Scripture although some of these names occur in other Old Testament passages but they do not refer to the characters in chapter 35. The individuals mentioned in verses 3-4 had some sort of official function in the temple, but their duties are not clear.

Verses 5-6 tell us that the Lord instructed Jeremiah to put the Recabites to the test by offering them wine to drink. He did this and they refused, citing the vow handed down through their family. In verses 7-10 they affirm that the entire family, wives, sons, and daughters have been absolutely faithful to these stipulations from the time of their forefather Jonadab the son of Recab.

In verses 12-14 Jeremiah is told to report those findings of true fidelity to the men of Judah and Jerusalem asking them to learn the lesson of obedience from this family. Verses 15-17 give the Lord’s observations about the comparison of fidelity (the Recabites) and infidelity (Judah). In verses 18-19 the Lord commends the fidelity of the Recabites and pledges that “Jonadab, son of Recab will never fail to have a man to serve me.”

### **Who were the Kenites**

We must first ask the question, “Who were the Kenites?” They are first mentioned in Gen. 15:19 when the Lord tells Abraham about the land his descendants would occupy. In Judg. 1:16 we find out that the father-in-law of Moses was spoken of as a Kenite (see also Num. 10:29 where Moses’ father-in-law was called a Midianite). They lived in the southern part of Canaan and were friendly to the Israelites at the time of the exodus, but in I Chron. 2:52-55 there are indications that they were included as part of the Israelite nation. For their protection they were told to leave the city of Amalek because the Amalekites were going to be destroyed, I Sam. 15:6. From what is said in Jer. 35 they appear to have worshippers of the Lord.

All of this has caused various commentators to conclude that they vowed to live a nomadic life, refraining from agriculture, wine, etc. so that they would not mix the religion of the Lord with the practices of Baal worship which glorified agriculture and Baal as the fertility god. (Thompson, 1980, pp. 616-617 and Hyatt, 1956, p. 1059.)

Keown, *et al.*, take a different position. They consider Thompson, Hyatt and others to be highly speculative. Although the names are the same in connecting Jonadab the son of Recab to the Rechabites (II Kgs. 10:15), these commentators believe that this is not a necessary conclusion. Keown, *et al.* say that in other Old Testament references to the name Jonadab is associated with an urban lifestyle. However, every other reference to that name identifies a different father than that found in Jer. 35. Various other commentators have presented different theories concerning the identity of the Kenites, none of which are without difficulties.

A different option is presented by Keown, *et al.* They contend that the group (family, clan) name in Hebrew could easily be related to the word “chariot,” and they may have been chariot makers or artisans who, of necessity, had a somewhat nomadic lifestyle. Other theories have also been advocated by scholars. Keown, *et al.* conclude with these words: “Perhaps the most valuable contribution of these options is the realization that too scant information is available to draw many conclusions about the Rechabites. Some of the traditional approaches may have merit. The full identity of the Rechabites and their place in the cultural patterns of Israel cannot be determined. The clearest description of the group begins and ends with the passage in Jer. 35.” (Keown, *et al.*, 1995, on CD.)

### **Jeremiah’s scroll – historical perspective. 36:1-32**

From the point of view of history chapter 36 is one of the most important statements in the book of Jeremiah. It gives us information on the writing and rewriting of the book. These events took place in the fourth year of Jehoiakim which places them in the year 605/604 B.C. Historical details from the Bible, secular historical sources, and archaeological discoveries give important information on Nebuchadnezzar’s incursions into Palestine. Seeing these things together gives us a composite picture of the events surrounding our text. This information can show us some of the reasons for the reactions of the people as well as the rulers when they heard the words of the scroll read to them. Some historical and geographical notes are appropriate at this point.

The city of Carchemish was located on the Euphrates River north of Syria and about 100 miles (161 km.) east of the northeastern corner of the Mediterranean Sea. After the fall of Nineveh in 612 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar attacked the vestiges of the Assyrian army at Carchemish as he made his way westward and southward toward Palestine. Earlier the Egyptians had conquered parts of Palestine, and Judah was a vassal of Egypt at this time. The Egyptian army came to Carchemish to fight against Nebuchadnezzar and protect their own interests in Palestine. As the Egyptians moved toward Carchemish Josiah met them at Megiddo where they fought a battle in which Josiah was killed (II Kgs. 23:29-30). This took place in 609 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar defeated the Egyptians and the remnants of the Assyrian army at Carchemish in the late spring of 605 B.C. After that the Babylonians began moving southward into Syria and Palestine.

It is significant that 605 B.C. was the fourth year of Jehoiakim when the Lord told Jeremiah to write on the scroll all of the words of the Lord. In the ninth month of the following year, Jehoiakim’s fifth year, Baruch read Jeremiah’s scroll in the temple (36:8-9). This dates the reading of the scroll in December, 604 B.C. which was also the very month the Babylonian army attacked and sacked the city of Ashkelon. This Philistine city was located on the southeastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. It is easy to see why the people would have been fearful of the Babylonians

at that time. On the other hand, the governmental officials, perhaps wanting to keep the morale of the country as high as possible, refused to respond to the reading of the scroll. They probably thought that it would be demoralizing to approve a proclamation which said that Jerusalem would fall to the Babylonians. It was not until 587 B.C. (seventeen years later) that Nebuchadnezzar sacked Jerusalem. We must not overlook the theological content of the scroll as well as the impact of its political, military, and economic content. It is at this point that Jeremiah had such a clash with Jehoiakim – the political, military, and economic forces VS. the theological reality.

### **Jeremiah writes the Lord's words on a scroll. 36:1-8**

Verse 1 identifies the time of this incident as the fourth year of the reign of Jehoiakim which makes it 605/604 B.C. After the death of Josiah (609 B.C.), Jehoahaz his son was made king. However, when Pharaoh Neco returned from the battle of Carchemish in 605 B.C. he removed Jehoahaz and placed Eliakim another son of Josiah on the throne and changed his name to Jehoiakim (II Kgs. 23:34).

Verse 2 gives Jeremiah's response and verse 3 tells us that the Lord wanted this read to the people in hopes that it would bring repentance. At this point we need to notice that the scroll would have contained only the oracles and other information prior to the fourth year of Jehoiakim. Some of the material in chapters 1-35 would not have been included in that scroll because our text of Jeremiah is not in chronological order. The writing of the scroll covered material in Jeremiah's ministry beginning in 626 B.C. and continuing until 605 B.C. but chapters 1-35 contain a considerable amount of information spoken or written after the fourth year of Jehoiakim, *e.g.* during the time of Jehoiachin and Zedekiah. We must also remember that 605 B.C. was the year of Nebuchadnezzar's defeat of Pharaoh at Carchemish. The Babylonians then continued their incursion into Syria-Palestine.

Verses 4-7 tell of Baruch's experience in writing Jeremiah's words on the scroll and bringing it to the temple. Jeremiah's hope was that these words would turn the people back to the Lord and the tragedies in store for Judah would not come to pass. Verses 4-5 tell of Jeremiah's request to Baruch. Jeremiah had been barred from the temple, but we do not know why.

Verse 6 says that Baruch was to read the scroll publically on a day of fasting. This took place in the ninth month (36:8-9) which places it in our month of December, 604 B.C. according to the Babylonian calendar. According to the Hebrew calendar the ninth month would be May-June. However, since verse 22 says that Jehoiakim was in his winter quarters and that he had a fire burning, it places these events in December (Babylonian calendar) rather than May-June (Hebrew calendar).

The text seems to assume that the fast day of which he speaks would have been familiar to the people since no specifics are given concerning it. The Day of Atonement is the only commanded fast day in the Law of Moses, but since it took place in the seventh month of the Hebrew calendar, the month Tishri – September-October – this could not have been the fast being spoken of by Jeremiah. Many scholars believe that this may have been a fast which was called as a religious rite to invoke the favor of the Lord in view of the military emergency. The Babylonians

were already in Ashkelon, on the Philistine Plains, as noted above. We get the picture of a very tense military and political situation in Judah at the time of the reading of the scroll.

### **The reading of the scroll and the reactions. 36:9-19**

Although we meet Baruch in chapter 32, that incident took place while Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, was on the throne. The incident of the scroll here in chapter 36 took place earlier, during the reign of Jehoiakim. Consequently, from a chronological perspective this reference in chapter 36 is the first time Baruch appears on the scene. As noted above the scroll was read to all the people who had come in from the towns of Judah. The reading took place in the room of Gemariah, the son of Shaphan who was the secretary. In verse 10 the New Gate and upper court are mentioned as the location of this room. An interesting parallel is seen in II Kgs. 22:3—23:3 where Shaphan is mentioned as the secretary at the time of the discovery of the book of the Law in the days of Josiah.

Verses 11-13 tell of the reaction of Micaiah the son of Gemariah. When he heard the words of the scroll he went to the palace and reported the events to Elishama, the secretary. Many of the governmental officials were gathered there. We might view this as a sort of security council meeting since there were many political and military threats arising at this time.

Verses 14-19 state that Jehudi (Yehudi) was told to bring Baruch and the scroll to them and read it in their presence. When they listened to the reading of the scroll they looked at each other in fear, and asked if these were the words of Jeremiah. The answer was, “Yes.” The council realized the necessity for this to come to the king’s attention but they also seem to have anticipated the king’s disapproval of the contents of the scroll so they instructed Baruch and Jeremiah to go into hiding for their own protection. Perhaps they remembered that early in the reign of Jehoiakim he had Uriah, a prophet of the Lord, brought back from Egypt where he had fled and had him executed (26:20-24).

### **King Jehoiakim and the scroll. 36:20-32**

Having taken these precautions, verses 20-21 speak of the scroll being put in the secretary’s room and the king was to be informed. Many commentators believe that they purposely left the scroll in the room of Elishama (verse 20) because they did not want the king to see it, thinking that a verbal summary might be sufficient. However, the king asked that the scroll be brought and read in his presence. Jehudi was then instructed to take the scroll to the king and read it to him. This whole procedure appears to be a sort of “chain of command” through which the contents of the scroll were taken.

It was winter, and the king was in his winter apartment where a firepot was burning. As Jehudi read a few columns of the scroll the king cut them off with a scribe’s knife and threw them into the fire. This continued until the entire scroll was destroyed. When the scroll was read the king and his attendants showed no fear and they did not tear their garments. The rending of one’s garment was a sign of remorse, sorrow, shame, or distress among ancient Middle Eastern people.

Verses 25-26 tell us that Elnathan, Delaiah, and Gemariah urged Jehoiakim not to destroy the scroll but he refused and ordered one of his sons and two others to arrest Baruch and Jeremiah. Verse 26 however, says that the Lord had hidden them. Thompson makes some interesting observations of the parallel circumstances of Josiah and the discovery of the book of the Law in II Kgs. 22 compared with Jehoiakim (Josiah's son) and the reading of the scroll. First the scroll came into the hands of state officials, just as the information about the discovery of the book of the Law first came into the hands of state officials (II Kgs. 22:9-10, Jer. 36:10-11). Second, each of the accounts give the king's reaction when the information of the discovery of the book of the Law and the information of the scroll were presented (II Kgs. 22:11-13, Jer. 36:23-26). Third, both refer to an oracle following the reaction of each of the kings (II Kgs. 22:15-20, Jer. 36:28-31). Fourth, in II Kgs. 22:11 it mentions that Josiah "rent his clothes" but in Jer. 36:24 it mentions that Jehoiakim *did not* rend his clothes. (Thompson, 1980 p. 628).

Guy P. Couturier and some other commentators believe that the fact the Jehoiakim was an Egyptian appointee and vassal of Egypt, (see II Kgs. 23:31-37), he may have been anticipating the successful intervention of Pharaoh Neco if the Babylonians threatened Judah. This may account, in part, for the reaction of Jehoiakim. (Couturier, 1968, p. 330.) Some commentators suggest the possibility that Jehoiakim might have thought that by destroying the scroll he could destroy its message. This might fit into some of the superstitions of paganism but there is no evidence that this is what Jehoiakim thought. In verses 27-28 the Lord instructs Baruch to rewrite all of Jeremiah's dictation on another scroll.

Verses 29-31 give an oracle describing the destruction of Jerusalem and the king's fate. Jehoiakim would not have a direct descendant on the throne of David; the king of Babylon would come and destroy the land, cutting off both men and animals. Jehoiakim would be killed and his body thrown out to be exposed to the elements; his children and his attendants would be punished for their wickedness and the people in Jerusalem would suffer every disaster the Lord had pronounced because they would not listen to the Lord's words.

Verse 32 concludes this saga by saying that Jeremiah dictated the Lord's words again to Baruch who wrote them on the new scroll along with much additional material.

The two accounts of the details of the kings during the final years of the Kingdom of Judah are found in II Kgs. 23:34—25:7 and II Chron. 36:4-14, and are sometimes confusing. The sequence of events was this. Pharaoh Neco removed Jehoahaz from the throne of Judah and replaced him with Eliakim but changed his name to Jehoiakim. He ruled for eleven years, II Kgs. 23:34—24:6 and II Chron. 36:48. Jehoiakim was deposed by Nebuchadnezzar and taken to Babylon as a captive. His son, Jehoiachin followed him but he lasted only three months and ten days and was also taken to Babylon as a captive, II Kgs. 24:6-16 and II Chron. 36:8-10. Nebuchadnezzar replaced Jehoiachin with his uncle, Mattaniah and Nebuchadnezzar changed his name to Zedekiah. He reigned for eleven years, and was the king of Judah at the time that the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem. His sons were killed before his eyes, and he was blinded by the Babylonians and taken to Babylon, II Kgs. 24:17—25:7 and II Chron. 36:10-14.



## **Chapter XII**

### **The Siege and Fall of Jerusalem**

#### **37:1—39:18**

#### **Introduction:**

Nebuchadnezzar had made a number of invasions into Palestine, each of which gradually depleted the economic, military, social, and political resources of Judah and the towns to the south. Chapters 37-39 of Jeremiah deal with the last days of Judah. These chapters give important insights into the apparent struggles of the political leaders, particularly Zedekiah as they tried to make sense out of the conflicting religionists (including the false prophets as well as Jeremiah) who brought their counsel to the king. It is important to notice that king Zedekiah refers to the Lord in a way that would make us think that the king was a “believer,” only to see later that he is trying to include the optimism of the false prophets as well as the revelations of doom from Jeremiah. All of this makes for a very realistic dialogue and a vivid series of events.

Commentators have noted how many personal names are mentioned in these chapters, making the account very personal, lending validity to the section. We should also notice that these narratives are not simply historical but they also carry a strong theological message: “the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men, and gives them to anyone he wishes,” (Dan. 4:25) and “righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people” (Prov. 14:34). In this way the narratives in Jeremiah place history in its correct theological context.

In this block we will also see that the political and military problems in Judah gave rise to a division among the people. Without doubt the people of Judah would have wanted freedom from outside interference. For a period of time they had been dominated by the Egyptians and now are being threatened by the Babylonian invasions. These facts presented great practical, political, military, economic, and religious problems for them. Pharaoh Hophra (589-570 B.C.), the grandson of Pharaoh Neco, was now the Egyptian king. Some of the people of Judah favored Babylonian domination while others favored Egyptian domination. The Israelite military was weak and the people apparently knew that either Babylon or Egypt would become their masters. Some may have considered the Babylonian-Egyptian battles as signals of the relative strength of two nations. In this context Jeremiah warned them not to go to Egypt for help, but this warning fell, at least in part, on deaf ears. These and other historical data lend realism to the narrative and help us see the real conflicts which the people must have felt between their religion, both false and true, and what they viewed as the “practical problems” of self preservation. They were never able to solve this conflict because of their refusal to listen to Jeremiah’s messages. Many of the events described in this section took place during the brief interruption in the siege of Jerusalem.

#### **Archaeological discoveries at Lachish.**

The Assyrians had a very strong desire to expand their empire into Palestine partly because this gave them access to the Mediterranean Sea. In 722 B.C. they took Samaria and led the northern kingdom of Israel into captivity. During the days of Hezekiah, King of Judah (715-687 B.C.)

Lachish, one of the most prominent cities of the southern part of Judah fell to the Assyrians under Sennacherib (705-681 B.C.). A stone relief, now in the archaeology section of the British Museum gives a vivid picture of Sennacherib's battle for the city. By the time of Jehoiakim (608-597 B.C.) the city had been rebuilt. Shortly after the demise of the Assyrian Empire in 612 B.C. the Babylonians under king Nebuchadnezzar had their eyes on southern Palestine. In December 604 B. C. they invaded it, moving as far south as Ashkelon, a coastal city in the Philistine Plain. About seventeen years later (587-586 B.C.) the Babylonians invaded again, this time destroying Lachish.

The Lachish Letters, discovered in 1935 and 1938 give us a great deal of valuable information concerning the Babylonian invasion of southern Palestine. W.F. Albright refers to these letters as a "sensational discovery." Because of the similarity of language between the Lachish Letters and some of the prose sections of the book of Jeremiah and the fact that the "Letters" were written between 598 and 588 B.C. these are considered exceptionally valuable, "throwing great light on the Bible." Albright also says, "The end of the monarchy of Judah has been so brightly illuminated by these discoveries at Lachish, Tell Beit Mirsim [Debir], and other sites that Jeremiah's life and times can no longer be drastically misinterpreted by competent scholars." (Albright, 1960, p. 230.) The "Letters" are written on broken pieces of pottery called ostraca, a common writing material of that day.

Charles Pfeiffer relates a statement from a seal discovered in Lachish. It reads, "To Gedaliah who is over the house." (Pfeiffer, 1966, pp. 347-349.) This was probably the person spoken of as the governor of the area in II Kgs. 25:22-25, Ez. 10:18, and Jer. 38:1, 39:14, and 40:5-16. Letter #3 of the Lachish discoveries was written by an unknown person named Hoshaiiah who refers to "Koniah, the son of Elnathan" who made a trip to Egypt seeking help. Elnathan is mentioned in II Kgs. 24:8, Ez. 8:16, and Jer. 26:22, 36:12, and 36:25. Although we cannot be sure that the names appearing in the Lachish Letters are the same individuals as those in these passages, it is important to know that such names were associated with the places and also the time period of which the Old Testament speaks.

### **Zedekiah's first consultation with Jeremiah. 37:1-10**

The siege of Jerusalem was in progress, but it was suspended for a short time so that Nebuchadnezzar could engage the Egyptian army which had come to the aid of Jerusalem. Lachish Letter #2 speaks of the commander of the army of Judah making a visit to Egypt perhaps seeking Egypt's help. However, Thompson mentions that this might have been for the purpose of preventing an invasion from Egypt. The Egyptians came to Jerusalem in order to help defend it because Pharaoh had a vested interest in Jerusalem since Zedekiah was a vassal of Egypt, II Kgs. 23:33 and Jer. 37:4-5. The time signature in verse 37:1 probably indicates that the material from chapter 37 through 45 took place during the reign of Zedekiah. Thompson believes that whoever assembled the various parts of the book of Jeremiah included this as a complete block. (Thompson, 1980 p. 631.)

Verse 2 shows that Zedekiah has some confidence or respect for Jeremiah's counsel, but he paid little attention to the Lord's injunctions. In 37:3 Zedekiah sent Jehukal, the son of Shelemiah to ask Jeremiah "to please pray to the Lord our God for us." In 38:4 he joined the other officials

saying that Jeremiah should be executed because he demoralizes the soldiers. The fact that Zedekiah asked Jeremiah “to pray to the Lord our God for us” but refused to heed Jeremiah’s words may show that he considered the Lord as just one more god in the pagan pantheon, and wanted to take advantage of all of the favors of all of the gods. This could also reflect the frustration of the king regarding the military and political situation. Zedekiah is not pictured quite as evil as his two predecessors, Jehoiachin and Jehoiakim. Zedekiah is pictured as a sort of “gray” character rather than completely evil. Keown, *et al.* believe “Zedekiah always paid ‘secret’ attention to the words of Jeremiah. He seems all but convinced of the truth of those words but never has the courage to act on his convictions.” (Keown, *et al.* 1995, on CD).

Verses 6-10 do not support Zedekiah possible optimism about the brief lifting of the siege. In spite of the fact that the king had requested the prayers of the prophet, Jeremiah’s message is not encouraging. He says that the Babylonians will return and even if all of the Babylonian soldiers were injured and Judah’s army defeated them, they would still come out and burn down the city of Jerusalem. This is a rhetorical exaggeration but it shows the inevitability of the pending doom of Jerusalem. This must have heightened the stress of the people and strengthened their opposition to Jeremiah’s words. It is not surprising that they arrested and mistreated him.

### **Jeremiah’s arrest and imprisonment. 37:11-21**

In chapter 32 Jeremiah had purchased a piece of land at Anathoth and the incident in 37:11-21 is thought by some commentators to have been connected to that purchase, although this is not completely clear. (Bright, 1965, pp. 232-234, and Thompson, 1980, pp. 633-634.) In chapter 32 the prophet was imprisoned and confined to the courtyard of the guard in the royal palace, and some commentators believe that this is the arrest which is also spoken of in 37:11-15. However, Keown, *et al.* and some others believe these are two separate incidents. (Keown, *et al.*, 1995, on CD.)

The siege of Jerusalem was in progress but had been lifted briefly, and the incidents described here took place during that brief period of respite (37:11). The people were apparently free to move in and out of the city and no doubt they were jubilant over this probably, thinking that the predictions of peace and security coming from the “other prophets” were coming true.

Jeremiah was about to leave the city via the Benjamin Gate when he was detained by Irijah, the captain of the guard. The prophet was accused of attempting to desert to the Babylonians and he was arrested. The Benjamin Gate was on the north, and led to the territory of the tribe of Benjamin where Anathoth was located. In the minds of the governmental officials there may have been some foundation for this accusation since Jeremiah had been so outspoken about the inevitability of the Babylonian victory over Jerusalem.

A portion of the house of Jonathan had been converted to a prison, and it was there that Jeremiah was confined. He was first beaten by an angry group of governmental officials. Verse 16 says this was a vaulted cell in a dungeon where he stayed for a long time. The conditions were apparently very unhealthy because later the prophet feared that he would die if left there much longer (37:20).

In verse 17 King Zedekiah sent for him again and asked him, “Is there any word from the Lord?” In most English translations this is spoken of as a “secret” meeting but the NIV translates it “private” which does not seem to capture the context very well. Jeremiah’s past messages had been considered almost treasonous and the fact that now the king is once again asking about a “word from the Lord” would have placed Zedekiah in a very awkward position. However, Jeremiah’s message was the same and no doubt came to the king as a very unwelcome oracle. Jeremiah’s answer to the king’s question was “Yes.” The prophet did not elaborate immediately but asked a question concerning his own confinement. “What crime have I committed against you or your officials or this people, that you have put me in prison?” This was followed by a chiding question about the “other” prophets to whom Zedekiah had spoken. “Where are they?” Their optimistic messages that Babylon would not attack Jerusalem, that there would be peace and security, etc. had not come true. Why then had the prophet of the Lord been imprisoned. He feared for his own life in such unhealthy circumstances and orders were given that he should be placed in the courtyard of the guard and given bread from the street vendors, but he remained in custody. The expression “street of the bakers” was a common ancient identification of a street in the market place where the bakers sold their wares. Jeremiah was to be fed as long as bread lasted in the besieged city. Zedekiah was walking a very thin line, trying to listen to all counsel, partially believing Jeremiah, but never having the moral courage to obey the Lord.

### **Jeremiah and the cistern. 38:1-13**

Chapter 38 poses significant questions for commentators as they consider its relationship to the previous chapter. The two accounts, 37:11-21 and 38:1-13 have a great deal in common, but there are also differences. See below for further information on this.

In 38:1 we have the names of a number of individuals, two of whom we have met before. Jehucal had brought Jeremiah to Zedekiah, 37:3 and Pashhur the son of Malchiah had been sent by Zedekiah to ask Jeremiah if he had any word from the Lord, 21:1-2. Notice that in 20:1 we have a different person named Pashhur who was the son of Immer who was a bitter enemy of Jeremiah. Even so, we know very little about these men. The prophet’s message in 38:1-3 is the same as elsewhere but the government officials of Zedekiah opposed him because they thought that the message would be demoralizing to the army. Survival depended on leaving the city rather than remaining to suffer the perils of the siege and be killed. Elsewhere they were told to surrender to the Babylonians.

Verses 4-5 show that these men thought Jeremiah’s actions were treasonous and that he should be executed. In regard to “treason,” Jeremiah’s message was rightly perceived by his opposition because he advocated the desertion of the population and their surrender to Babylon. The king gave his officials permission to do with Jeremiah whatever they thought best. Zedekiah said, “The king can do nothing to oppose you” (38:5). Perhaps this shows the true moral and political weakness of Zedekiah since he did not have either the moral courage or political strength to stand up for the prophet whom he had consulted.

Verse 6 tells of the arrest of Jeremiah and his being thrown into the cistern of Malkijah, the king’s son. Cisterns were in wide use among ancient people. This one had no water in it and was supposedly no longer used. In the thirteenth century B.C. cisterns began to be cement-lined

but this one seems to have been out of use since it had no water in it but only mud. Jeremiah sank into the mud.

Verses 7-13 tell of Ebed-Melech, an Ethiopian (Cushite) eunuch in the palace of Zedekiah who informed the king of Jeremiah's plight. Zedekiah was sitting at the Benjamin Gate, presumably to hear legal complaints which were being brought to the king. This was a customary practice not only for the king but for others in his staff as in II Sam. 15:2-4. Ebed-Melech came to him claiming that Jeremiah would starve to death if left in the cistern. In the NIV Ebed-Melech is referred to as "an official" in the palace, but almost all other English translations refer to him as "a servant" or "a eunuch." Keown, *et al.* say that this word can be translated either way, but the fact that he was an Ethiopian probably means that he would have been a minor official but not necessarily a eunuch in the common use of the word. (Keown, *et al.*, 1995, on CD.) When the king was made aware of Jeremiah's condition he authorized Ebed-Melech to select thirty men and rescue the prophet. This was done, and is described in 38:11-13. Jeremiah remained in confinement in the courtyard until the fall of the city, 38:28.

### **A comparison of 37:11-21 and 38:1-13**

A comparison of these two passages presents a problem of their relationship to each other. The two accounts have a great deal in common, but there are also differences. Are these two separate accounts of the same incident or are they separate incidents which had many similarities? Competent scholarship is found on both sides of the issue.

#### Similarities:

1. The prophet is arrested and referred to state officials. 37:14-15, 38:1-4
2. He is detained in the house of Jonathan. 37:15, 38:26
3. He asked Zedekiah not to send him back to the house of Jonathan. 37:20-21, 38:26
4. The charge is either stated or implied to be treason. 37:13, 38:4
5. Jeremiah is imprisoned in a dungeon. 37:16, 38:6
6. He is put into a cistern. 37:16, 38:6. NOTE: In 37:16 the "vaulted cell" or "dungeon cell" is thought by many commentators to refer to a "cistern house."
7. The conditions were appalling. 37:16, 38:6
8. Jeremiah is released and had a secret conversation with Zedekiah. 37:17, 38:12-14, 24
9. Jeremiah was not sent back but was detained in the courtyard. 37:21, 38:28

#### Differences:

1. Chapter 37 tells of Jeremiah's arrest but it is not told in chapter 38.
2. The cistern house is located in the home of Jonathan the secretary in 37:15-16 but is located in the house of Malchoiah, the king's son in the court of the guard in 38:6.
3. The rescue from the cistern is told in detail including the name of Ebed-Melech, an official in the royal palace in 38:7-13 but is none of this is mentioned in chapter 37.
4. The king's secret meeting with Jeremiah is very brief in 37:17-20 but appears to be lengthy in 38:14-26.

5. In 37:21 Jeremiah was to be fed as long as the food lasted, but in 38:28 we are told that he was kept in the courtyard of the guard until the city fell to the Babylonians. It should be noted that in 52:6ff there is a notation that the food gave out just before the fall of the city.

The differences are rather insignificant, and it should be obvious that they can be fairly easily explained without doing violence to any of the text. Parallel accounts of various incidents are found elsewhere in Jeremiah, perhaps because of the disorganized character of the book and its lack of chronological sequence. For example, the temple sermon is found in both chapters 7 and 26 and there are many repetitions of the penalties for the disobedience of the nation as well as the blessings of the restoration.

John Bright makes an elaborate grouping of some of the events in the book attempting to present them in a near chronological arrangement. However he admits the difficulty of accuracy in this. He gives information on both sides of the questions of chapters 37 and 38, concluding with this statement: "For these reasons it seems to me – though I am not inclined to insist upon it – that much is to be said for the view that xxxvii 11-21 and xxxviii 1-28a are slightly divergent, but complementary and not essentially disharmonious accounts of the same series of events." (Bright, 1965, p. 234.)

#### **Another interview with Zedekiah. 38:14-28**

Some commentators believe that this was Jeremiah's final visit with Zedekiah although that is not completely clear. Verse 28 may indicate that there was no more contact and that Jeremiah simply remained under the courtyard of the guard.

In verse 14-19 we are told of Jeremiah's conversation with Zedekiah at the third entrance to the temple. We have no information concerning this location. When Jeremiah arrived Zedekiah asked for an honest statement from the Lord. Although Jeremiah feared for his life if he complied with Zedekiah's wishes, he was assured that no harm would come. The word from the Lord was the same as before, and it was simple. Comply with the words of the Lord and you and your household will be spared. If not, you and your household will suffer and your city will be burned down. Zedekiah continues to display a weak desire to please God and a strong desire to please the people. In verse 19 he admitted that he feared the Jews who had gone over to the Babylonians, thinking that he could be turned over to them and they might mistreat him.

Zedekiah acted as he had in the past. He did not have the courage or conviction to follow Jeremiah's counsel although he had often sought it. Perhaps he hoped for a supernatural intervention to give him what he wanted, but no such intervention was part of the message from the Lord. Although in the past the king had asked for Jeremiah's prayers and his words from the Lord, Zedekiah never learned that prayer is not a substitute for godliness, nor is listening to the Lord's words a substitute for obedience. His conduct makes an interesting character study of a person whose divided loyalties and misplaced priorities ultimately destroy him, his household, and his nation.

In verses 21-23 Jeremiah reminds Zedekiah of the consequences of his failure to obey the Lord. In short, he will be blamed for all of the suffering and destruction which takes place. The women will speak of how they had been deceived by the king whom they had trusted. The king will be one whose friends desert him. These themes had been part of some of the psalms of ancient Israel. See Ps. 41:9, Ps. 69:14, and Obad. 7. The king's household, his wives, and his children will all be brought to the Babylonians. In II Kgs. 25:7 and Jer. 32:3-5, 39:6-7 we are told that his sons were killed in his sight and then his eyes were put out.

Verses 24-28 almost give us hope that Zedekiah has seen the light and would turn to God, but it was not so. It appears that he knew the validity of Jeremiah's message and wanted to protect the prophet and himself from the officials who might inquire about the meeting if they found out about it. Jeremiah was to tell them only that he had asked that he not be put back to Jonathan's house, the house of the cistern. The officials heard of the meeting and asked about it. Jeremiah spoke to them as the king had instructed him but the more sensitive parts of the interview with the king were not reported to the officials. Thompson makes a penetrating comment on this episode. "Zedekiah returned to the palace to suffer the anguish of knowing what was right to do but lacking the courage to do it." (Thompson, 1980, p. 643.)

### **The chaos and violence of destruction of Jerusalem. 39:1—18**

The events of 39:1-10 parallel much of the content of 52:4-16 and II Kgs. 25:1-12. An unusual problem of the text is that the LXX does not have 39:4-13. There is no consensus among scholars which would offer a satisfactory answer to this problem but various possibilities are presented. Some say that verses 4-13 constitute a scribal omission which occurred early in transmission of the LXX text. However, others believe that these verses in the Masoretic text were really an addition. Another opinion says that these verses were inserted into the Masoretic text by a later editor. We consider these verses to be an authentic part of the text of the book.

The character of the description is clearly seen in 39:1-18. It is not clear however, why an additional account (52:4-16) was added. It is a scene of violence and chaos. The king and his company are attempting to escape toward the Arabah, a term used to speak of the Jordan valley, but they were caught and some were killed. Food was in short supply and a few men are mentioned who had food hidden away and that became their means of survival. In contrast to this Nebuchadnezzar had given specific orders through Nebuzaradan, the captain of the guard, to spare the life of Jeremiah and protect him.

### **The Babylonians enter the city. 39:1-10**

Verses 1-2 give us the chronological data concerning the destruction of the city. The Babylonian Chronicle gives valuable information on the chronology of the siege and ultimate fall of Jerusalem. The siege began on the tenth month of the ninth regnal year of Zedekiah. The wall was breached on the ninth day of the fourth month of Zedekiah's eleventh regnal year. This means that it was January, 588 B.C. when the siege began and the walls were breached in July, 587 B.C. A short time later (52:12ff, II Kgs. 25:8ff) Nebuzaradan, captain of the guard for Nebuchadnezzar arrived and began to set fire to the city. These dates are calculated on the Babylonian calendar with information from the Babylonian Chronicle. The Babylonian year as well as the He-

brew year overlapped the Julian calendar so that part of a year of a king's reign appears as if it were a full year. (Thompson, 1980, p. 646, Freedman, 1961, pp. 119-121.) The parallel account in chapter 52 will be fully discussed when we come to that chapter.

Verses 3-4 list a group of Babylonian officers who took their seats at the Middle Gate of the city. We do not have any information concerning the Middle Gate, and this is its only mention in the Bible. Zedekiah and other governmental officials escaped at night, going through the king's garden which was located near the pool of Siloam. They headed toward the Jordan valley near Jericho.

Verses 5-7 tell of the Babylonian pursuit of the king and his company and their capture near Jericho. These captives were taken to Nebuchadnezzar who was in Riblah, Syria. This city was located on the Orontes River about 75 miles (121 km.) north of Damascus on the two main highways linking Egypt, Palestine, and Mesopotamia. Apparently Nebuchadnezzar had set this as his headquarters when he moved into Syria. It was here that Zedekiah saw his sons executed and he had his own eyes put out. He was bound and taken to Babylon just as Jeremiah had predicted. We do not know anything about his death except that he died in a Babylonian prison (52:10-11).

By combining II Kgs. 25:3-4 with Jer. 39:8-10 we can see that Nebuzaradan arrived one month later and began the conflagration of the city. These fires finally destroyed "the temple of the Lord, the royal palace, and all of the houses of Jerusalem. Every important building he burned down," II Kgs. 25:8-9, Jer. 39:8. Nebuzaradan took many people to Babylon as captives but he left the poor people in the land. These people owned nothing but were given vineyards and fields to cultivate. At last the false prophets' optimistic predictions of peace, stability and security were proved to be counterfeit and Jeremiah's warnings of the doom of the city were proved to be true – but it was too late.

### **Jeremiah treated well by the Babylonians. 39:11-18**

In 39:3 and again in 39:13-14 the name of Nergal-Sharezer occurs and he is described as a high official in the Babylonian government. Some commentators believe that this was actually Neriglissar who later became king of Babylon. Evil-Merodach, who was the son of Nebuchadnezzar and heir to the throne, reigned only very briefly, 561-560 B.C. and was assassinated by Neriglissar who was his brother-in-law. His name occurs in some sixth century B.C. legal texts and other inscriptions from Babylon. He reigned from 559-556 B.C., and was replaced in a rebellion led by Belshazzar. The leaders of the rebellion put Nabonidus on the throne, but Belshazzar, his son, became the ruler in fact because Nabonidus spent most of his time at the resorts of Arabia. The names of Nebuzaradan and Neriglissar are both listed on a prism discovered in the ruins of the city of Babylon. They are mentioned as officials in the government of King Nebuchadnezzar but it is not definite that these are identical with those mentioned in the Jeremiah text. (Hyatt, 1956, pp. 1079-1081, Harrison, 1973, on CD.)

In verses 11-14 Nebuchadnezzar is shown giving orders to Nebuzaradan that he was to release Jeremiah and treat him with kindness. We know nothing about why this was done or what information the king of Babylon might have had about Jeremiah. However some commentators believe that favorable information about Jeremiah might have come through those who deserted



to the Babylonians and surrendered to them as Jeremiah had instructed. See 38:1-4. It may be that Nebuchadnezzar considered Jeremiah to be an ally of Babylon since he had spoken of Babylon's invasion of Judah being an act of the Lord. Jeremiah was turned over to Gedaliah who was to take him back home.

At this juncture, verses 15-18, Ebed-Melech who had earlier befriended Jeremiah is assured that he will not be harmed by the Babylonians. While Jeremiah was still confined in the court of the guard he was instructed by the Lord to go tell Ebed-Melech that he would not be harmed by the destruction which is about to come to Jerusalem. The reason for this protection was that he feared the Lord. Since Jeremiah was still confined it is probable that he sent someone to deliver this message. When the prophet was finally released he was turned over to Gedaliah.

## **Chapter XIII**

### **Gedaliah, Jeremiah and the Flight into Egypt**

#### **40:1—44:30**

#### **Introduction**

Chapter 40 is a continuation of the theme of 39:11-19, *i.e.* the release of Jeremiah from his confinement in the courtyard. The two pieces of the story are not easily harmonized, and Hyatt and some other commentators believe that there is no possibility of harmonization. (Hyatt, 1956, p. 1082.) However, see comments below.

Jeremiah had constantly admonished the people to obey the word of the Lord or there would be dire consequences to face when the Babylonians invaded. He had told them that Nebuchadnezzar was the servant of God (27:6) and would take over their country. Therefore they were to surrender to the Babylonians and make the best of a seemingly very bad situation. The false prophets had predicted peace, tranquility, security, and stability for the nation. It appears that Nebuchadnezzar had heard of the various predictions from the many prophets in Judah, but he favored Jeremiah. Perhaps he thought Jeremiah personally favored the Babylonians and he wanted to continue to have this prophet on “his side” in the struggle. Whatever the reason, the Babylonian king considered Jeremiah an asset and wanted to ensure kind treatment for him. Therefore he gave Jeremiah the option to live wherever he desired. Chapters 40-44 give additional information about the personal life of Jeremiah, the assassination of Gedaliah, and the flight into Egypt.

Commentators have had a great deal to say about the release of Jeremiah since there are two separate accounts (39:11-18 and 40:1-6) which may or may not be the same event. Jeremiah had been taken to Ramah in chains. With all of the chaos during the fall and destruction of Jerusalem Couturier, Harrison, and other commentators believe that Jeremiah was turned over to Gedaliah for deportation to Babylon. This mistake was discovered when word came from Nebuchadnezzar that the prophet of the Lord should be treated kindly and given the freedom to choose where he would live. (See Couturier, 1968, p. 331 and Harrison, 1973, on CD.) Concerning this Thompson says:

It would appear that there was a staging area at Ramah, the modern Er-Ram some 5 miles north of Jerusalem. From here the deportees would set off for Babylon . . . Jeremiah appeared with a group of other captives, all in fetters. There had been some mistake! Nebuchadnezzar had ordered considerate treatment for Jeremiah and he had been set free earlier (39:11-14). But an embarrassing mistake had been made by the soldiers responsible for rounding up the Jews in Jerusalem, and Jeremiah was brought in chains with the rest of the captives to Ramah. Nebuzaradan captain of the guard promptly set him free.

(Thompson, 1980, pp. 651-652.)

#### **Jeremiah released. 40:1-6**

Verse 1 gives a sort of introduction to this incident. It begins as if an oracle was to follow but no oracle is presented. Instead there is the historical account of the prophet's release. Verses 2-3 have a statement from the commander of the guard who found Jeremiah among the captives. The commander affirmed much of what Jeremiah had been preaching concerning the Lord's determination to punish the people of Judah because of their apostasy. He was therefore treated as a "friend" of the Babylonians. Concerning the statement of the commander, verses 2-6, Phillip Hyatt, a strong critic of the historicity of much of the book of Jeremiah says, "It has little independent historical value. It was designed to elevate the standing of the prophet, and to justify the actions of the Babylonians in destroying Jerusalem." (Hyatt, 1956, p. 1083.)

In verse 4 the commander invites Jeremiah to come to Babylon, but assures him that he can make any choice he desires. In verses 5-6 he encourages Jeremiah to go back to Gedaliah at Mizpah but then he adds that he is free to go anywhere he pleases. The exact location of Mizpah is not known. Two possibilities have been suggested; one is about four and one-half miles northwest of Jerusalem and the other is about eight miles north of Jerusalem. Jeremiah chose to go to Gedaliah and he was given provisions and a present when he left. Mizpah had a long political and religious history (Judg. 20:1-3, I Sam. 7:5-14, 10:17). Gedaliah was the grandson of Shephan who had been the secretary during the reign of Josiah (II Kgs. 22:12-14). It is remarkable that Jeremiah received better treatment from Judah's enemies than from his own countrymen who abused, tortured, imprisoned, and later kidnapped him.

### **Gedaliah and the people. 40:7-12**

Verses 7-8 tell us that the king of Babylon had appointed Gedaliah governor of the province and he was in charge of all the people. Some of the army of Judah had apparently escaped the Babylonians and were in hiding. However, when they heard the news that Gedaliah had been appointed governor they came back. Some of these commanders are named in verses 8-9.

One of Gedaliah's first undertakings was to assure the Jews who were remaining in the land that they would be safe. In verses 9-10 he assured them that they would receive land to cultivate crops of oil, wine, and summer fruit, and would have nothing to fear. He promised to stay in Mizpah and represent them before the Babylonians. Understandably some who had feared the consequences of the Babylonian invasion fled to Moab, Ammon, Edom, and other surrounding countries (40:11). After hearing of the assurances of safety from Gedaliah, many of them returned to the land.

At the time of the Assyrian invasion of the Kingdom of Israel (722 B.C.) the Assyrians colonized the land, but in the case of the Babylonians there is no evidence of such colonization. The plight of the surviving community of Jews appears to have been less traumatic than is generally pictured. At least some of those who remained in the land were living a near normal life, encouraged to cultivate their land and carry on their lives as usual. Although we cannot assume that this was a truly normal lifestyle, they were not severely treated at this time.

### **The assassination of Gedaliah. 40:13—41:3**

Verses 13-14 indicate that everything appeared to be going well with Gedaliah's appointment as governor, but unknown to him, there was an assassination plot underway. Johanan, along with the returning Jewish army officers came to Gedaliah in Mizpah and warned him that Baalis, king of the Ammonites had sent Ishmael, son of Nethaniah to assassinate Gedaliah. We know nothing of Baalis except what is mentioned here, nor do we know why he wanted Gedaliah assassinated. Some have speculated that there may have been jealousy or retaliation involved. In 27:1-7 Jeremiah had instructed the messengers from surrounding nations to tell their monarchs that their land would be turned over to the Babylonians. The assassination plot against Gedaliah may have been in retaliation against a Jewish appointee as governor. Had Gedaliah survived and governed the people remaining in the land we might have had a very different picture of the post-exilic return of the captives.

In the plot, Ishmael was to be the executioner. Some commentators entertain the idea that he may have been motivated by jealousy since he was of a descendant of David and therefore of royal blood (II Kgs. 25:25 and Jer. 41:1) but Gedaliah was not. Others believe that Ishmael may have been one of the super-patriots of Judah who believed that Gedaliah was a conspirator working for the Babylonians. Whatever the reason behind the plot, Gedaliah refused to believe that such a thing could happen. In verses 15-16 Johanan asked permission to kill Ishmael in order to protect Gedaliah but the governor did not believe he was in danger. The Jews seemed to have complete confidence in Gedaliah and had "gathered around him." Johanan believed the assassination would cause such fear in the people that they would scatter to other nations and the remnant would perish (40:16).

In the seventh month, October, the execution took place. We do not know whether this was the same year as the fall of Jerusalem or some time later. During the seventy years of the exile the Jews observed a fast during the seventh month (Zech. 7:5, 8:19). Since this was the month of the assassination of Gedaliah (41:1), some commentators believe this fast was in honor of the slain governor. The plot involved ten men with Ishmael. While Gedaliah was eating with a group of Jews Ishmael killed him. The ten other men with Ishmael killed the Jews who were present along with the Babylonian soldiers who were there.

### **Continuing atrocities. 41:4-18**

The atrocities of Ishmael and his cohorts were not over. Verses 4-9 tell us of a group of eighty men from Shechem, Shiloh, and Samaria who came to Mizpah carrying grain offerings and incense to go to the "house of the Lord." By this time the temple had been destroyed but apparently the site was still considered sacred. The fact that these men came with shaved heads and rent clothes probably indicates their sorrow and remorse that the city and its sanctuary had been destroyed. The events of this chapter took place in the seventh month (41:1) which is our month of September/October. In this month three sacred celebrations took place. On the first day of the seventh month was the Feast of Trumpets (Lev. 23:25ff); the tenth day of the seventh month was the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29); and on the fifteenth the day of the seventh month was the Feast of Tabernacles (Lev. 23:34). Although nothing is said about which sacred celebration was in the mind of these men, it is almost certain that it was the Feast of Tabernacles. The Day of Atonement was a day of fasting. With one of the sacrifices a grain offering was to be presented, but that was to be offered by the priest, not by the people (Num 29:7-11). The Feast of Trumpets

makes mention of grain offerings (Num. 29:1-6), but this was a very minor feast lasting only one day. The Feast of Tabernacles was a major feast lasting seven days, and grain offerings were specified.

The locations from which these individuals had come indicate that they were from the area of the old kingdom of Israel. Perhaps this indicated that there were still some in the north who were standing by the reforms of Josiah. See II Chron. 25:17-19. The men who came had shaved their heads and torn their garments, a sign of deep sorrow or remorse. Ishmael went out to meet them, weeping as he went and inviting them to come and see the governor. This was an act of the highest hypocrisy because when they entered the city Ishmael and his men killed them and cast their dead bodies into an empty cistern which had been built by King Asa. In I Kg. 15:22 there are details of some of the building activities of Asa but the building of the cistern is not mentioned. Ten of the men who came from the north were allowed to live because they had food stuffs, honey, barley, and oil hidden in a field.

Verses 10-15 tell us that Ishmael then made captives of the remaining people in Mizpah including the king's daughters, and they set out to go over to the Ammonites. Apparently Jeremiah was in this group, or perhaps joined them a little later since 42:2ff says that the people appealed to him to pray for them. When they came to the great pool of Gibeon Johanan and the army officers with him caught up with Ishmael and his men. The people taken captive by Ishmael escaped from him and went over to Johanan. Ishmael and eight of his men escaped this confrontation and went to the Ammonites as they had planned.

The pool of Gibeon was the scene of a bloody encounter in the days of Saul and David when twelve of Abner's men fought against twelve of Joab's men (II Sam. 2:12-16). In 1956-57 extensive archaeological excavations were conducted at this site, and a very large pool (or cistern) was uncovered. It measured 37 feet (11.28 m.) in diameter and 35 feet (10.67 m.) deep and it was hewn out of solid rock. Some archaeologists believe that this may have been the pool spoken of in this text. (Pfeiffer, 1966, pp. 264-267.)

The events which had just taken place, the assassination of Gedaliah and Ishmael's flight to Ammon would probably have been perceived by the Babylonians as the continual rebellion of the Jews, particularly those now being led by Johanan. Fear of reprisal certainly played a part in the following actions. In order to escape the wrath of the Babylonians these Jews were contemplating a flight to Egypt since it was the only neighboring country not dominated by the Babylonians.

In 41:16-18 we see that they went as far as Geruth Kimham, near Bethlehem, about 8 miles (12.8 km.) south of Jerusalem. Its location is unknown, and this is its only mention in the Bible. This comment by the writer indicates that they had made some progress toward a flight into Egypt, but they wanted divine approval for their actions.

**Request for guidance, God's answer, and the people's response. 42:1—43:7**

In 42:1—43:13 we have the encounter between Jeremiah and those who were fleeing to Egypt. The last specific reference to the prophet was in 40:6. He is not mentioned at all in the narrative of the assassination of Gedaliah and the story of Ishmael, etc.

In 42:1-6 we have an extensive pledge by the people to obey the word of the Lord regardless of what that word might be. One cannot but wonder why the people and officials continued to come to Jeremiah whom they considered a prophet of gloom and doom rather than to their “other prophets” who had been so positive and reassuring and brought a message of peace and victory. Yet in verses 5-6 the people went so far as to swear that whether or not the word of the Lord pleased them they would obey him. On the other hand it seems evident from 41:17 that Johanan was determined in his own mind to take the people into Egypt since the text refers to their stop at Geruth Kimham as “on their way to Egypt.” There seems to be an undercurrent of panic with the people who apparently saw great danger and certain punishment if they returned to the Babylonians. They perceived Egypt as their only hope. Still divine approval was seemingly important to them.

These events really introduce us to the final phase of Jeremiah’s prophetic ministry which concluded in Egypt. The tragic end was that the people paid no more attention to him in this instance than they did in all of the events of the past. Those events ended with the invasion by the Babylonians. The complete failure of the predictions of peace and security offered by the “other prophets” seemed to make no difference to the populace. These events are about to bring to the final conclusion the tragic ministry of one of Israel’s greatest prophets. His words were consistently right, but with equal consistency they were rejected by God’s people.

Verses 7-22 give Jeremiah’s detailed oracle from God. Verses 7-12 tell us that ten days passed before the word of the Lord came to the prophet – and it was destined to be rejected as had the past oracles. He called the representatives of the people together to give them the word of the Lord. The language used here is reminiscent of the original call of the prophet in 1:10 – “I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.” Jeremiah said the word from the Lord was that Israel would be planted and built up; they would not be uprooted or torn down. The heart of the Lord was grieved over the disaster which he had brought against his people, yet it was necessary punishment for their apostasy and evil. The Lord promised that he would be with them and save them; he would show compassion and restore them to the land. This reminds us of the covenantal promises constantly repeated in the exhortations of the Old Testament prophets.

Verses 13-22 state the conditions and warnings of the oracle. The conditions are stated in the negative. If they disobey and go to Egypt there would be consequences to suffer. They may think this would reduce the chances of war, poverty, hunger and famine but those were false hopes. The people overlook an underlying truth, *i.e.* the future of the nation lies with those who remain in the land and the exiles who will return from their captivity to rebuild and restore the nation’s identity. The future is not with those who flee to Egypt, even though it seems to be a very attractive alternative. They thought that they would avoid all of those perils by fleeing to Egypt, but the Lord said that in the long run, they would die in a foreign land, they would never return, they would be the objects of cursings and horrors, and the anger of the Lord would ultimately be poured out of them (42:15-18). Jeremiah pleads with them to return to the Lord in obedience or they would die by sword, famine, and plague.

In 43:1-7 we have the response of the people and their officials. They seem to have been completely convinced that their own plan would certainly be the Lord's plan, and their promise to obey, even if the Lord's plan was different, turns to be the height of hypocrisy. Those who opposed Jeremiah at this point are called "arrogant men" 43:2, accusing Jeremiah of lying and receiving pressure from Baruch. Some commentators believe that Baruch was blamed here because the people and their officials did not want to appear to be disobeying or rebelling against an authentic word from God. If this is the case, they may have perceived the whole situation not as their disobedience of the Lord's will but the disregarding of the message of a prophet who was lying to them under pressure from Baruch. Consequently they could have concluded that Baruch had convinced Jeremiah to lie about the oracle. Since the Lord had not given what they wanted they thought their only alternative was to deny that this was the word of the Lord. Thompson makes a very pointed comment: "Here is a good example of a man who was so persuaded that his own wrong views were right that his mind was completely closed to another possibility – an age-old phenomenon." (Thompson, 1980 p. 669.) Jeremiah is apparently kidnapped and taken to Egypt, for it is unthinkable that he would have gone willingly after all that he had taught against it, and the oracles from the Lord which he had delivered to the people. They entered the Egyptian city of Tahpanhes. This was a frontier city in the northeastern part of the Nile delta. It would have been the first Egyptian city reached when one was enroute from Judah to Egypt.

### **The invasion of Egypt foretold. 43:8-13**

While in Tahpanhes the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah instructing him to perform a symbolic act as he presented an oracle from the Lord. The "palace of Pharaoh" was not the royal palace because there was no such palace in Tahpanhes. Therefore it was probably an important government building, perhaps the official house occupied by the governor of the region. Bright and Thompson both refer to A. Cowley's work in the Aramaic papyri where the expression "the king's house" was used in this way by the Elephantine colony of Jews. (See Cowley, 1923, pp. 4-6 and Bright, 1965, p. 263.)

Following the symbolic gesture Jeremiah explains its meaning. The design of the whole oracle is to show the Jews that although they had sought protection and security in Egypt, it was not to be. Instead, they would still come under the domination of Nebuchadnezzar. The symbolism in this passage should not be taken literally as if the Babylonian king would set up his literal throne on that site. Instead, this symbolizes the fact that the very place to which the Jews had fled in order to escape the Babylonians would be the place where the Babylonians would dominate them. Their disobedience to the Lord would not result in the protection of Egypt. Once again the king of Babylon is referred to as the Lord's servant. See 25:9 and 27:6.

The Babylonian invaders would humiliate the gods of Egypt by demolishing their temples and burning them. This was a common practice among ancient rulers when they invaded various cities and countries. Most of the pagans believed that their gods were the protectors of the cities, and to burn their temples was to declare victory not only over the city but over their gods as well. Egypt offered almost no resistance to Nebuchadnezzar's plundering activity.

In verse 12 there is an interesting variation between the Masoretic Text and the LXX. The MT reads, “as a shepherd wraps his garment around him,” picturing the Babylonian king as walking confidently through Egypt. The LXX reads, “as a shepherd cleans his cloak of vermin,” picturing the Babylonian king picking the land of Egypt clean as a shepherd would pick lice from his garment. In 567-566 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar invaded Egypt during the reign of Pharaoh Amasis (570-526 B.C.) but a brief inscription implies that it was not in the nature of permanent conquest but was of a punitive nature. Nevertheless, Nebuchadnezzar had his own way with the Egyptians.

### **Jeremiah’s final words. 44:1-30**

Scholars generally agree that the structure of the book and the content of chapter 45 show that 44:1-30 constitute Jeremiah’s final words. Chapter 45 shows that Jeremiah dictated to Baruch the oracles against the nations, chapters 46-51, during the fourth year of Jehoiakim. Chapter 52 took place during the reign of Zedekiah (52:1) and is basically a summary-replay of Jer. 39, II Kgs. 25, and II Chron. 36:11-21. We do not know why these oracles should have been placed at the conclusion of the book. Some scholars believe that, for a short time these chapters might have circulated separate from the rest of the book. We have no direct information which sheds light on this situation. Much of what is said in these warnings has been said before and there is basically nothing new.

### **The Jews’ lack of repentance or remorse. 44:1-14**

In verses 1-6 Jeremiah speaks to the Jews living in Lower Egypt in the cities of Migdol, Tahpanhes, and Memphis, and also in Upper Egypt although no cities are specified. The city of Migdol is mentioned in Ex. 14:2 in connection with Israel’s exodus from Egypt and again in Ezek. 29:10 and 30:6. It was a fortress city but its location is not known for sure. Scholars believe it was about twenty-five miles east-northeast of Tahpanhes. (Keown, *et al.*, 1995, on CD.) Noph was the Hebrew name for Memphis. It was located about 13 miles (20.9 km.) south of modern day Cairo and was one of the most important cities of northern Egypt. At the site of ancient Memphis archaeologists have uncovered the ruins of temples to Ptah, (“the creator god” and “father of the gods”), Isis (the goddess of fertility), and Ra (the sun god). Pathros which means the “land of the south” was the general name of Upper Egypt and it occurs in some translations of verse 1. It is possible that there were already Jewish colonies in Lower Egypt around the delta since those were the cities where the refugees settled. In addition, there are thought to have been some Jews who, through the centuries, had settled in the northern sections of Egypt. In addition, some Jews might have been taken captive when the Egyptians made various incursions into Judah.

Jeremiah begins his warnings by reminding the people of the calamities that had come to Jerusalem and the towns of Judah. These disasters came because of the sins of the people. He particularly calls attention to burning incense to other gods. This word is sometimes translated “sacrifice.” Again and again the Lord sent the prophets to them but to no avail. In all of this the Jews had learned nothing. Their idolatry persisted. Although Jeremiah could not have been speaking directly to all of the Jews who had come from Mizpah, his words are certainly designed to include them. We do not know just how the messages may have been transmitted.



In verses 7-10 Jeremiah turns the argument to its practical side. By turning away from the Lord the people were only harming themselves. Verse 7 asks, “Why bring such disaster on yourselves by cutting off from Judah the men and women, the children and infants, and so leave yourselves without a remnant?” These verses continue to ask similar questions emphasizing the practical foolishness of their behavior. God had always promised to care for them, bless them, and protect them, yet they foolishly turned to gods made by their own hands, burning incense to those which were not gods at all. Had they learned nothing from the errors committed by their forefathers?

Verses 11-14 carry a very basic statement. Since the people had decided to go to Egypt against the will of the Lord, and had continued in their idolatrous worship, the Lord would continue in his resolve to destroy Judah and bring disaster on them. They would perish in Egypt and die by the sword and by famine. They would become the objects of cursing and horror and would be a reproach. None would escape to return to the land. This very strong statement is moderated somewhat by verse 14b: “none will return except a few fugitives.” Because this seems to contradict the original statement, many scholars believe it is a gloss added at a later time.

### **The arrogance of the Jews as they adopt Egyptian idolatry. 44:15-19**

In some ways the response of the people in this second reply is not surprising. Their defiant arrogant attitude is a result of their constant practice of sin and idolatry. Their theological outlook is completely different from that of Jeremiah, and they are willing to write off the prophet of God to their own destruction. In every instance, Jeremiah has been right and the “other prophets” have been wrong. The prophet of the Lord had prevailed in all of his warnings and predictions, but the hearts of the people were hardened. Their forefathers had seen the reforms of Josiah but their own generation had drifted away from those principles, only to meet disasters. Their kings had been dispossessed and dethroned by their enemies, yet they did not heed these warnings. Verse 15 introduces the audience as “the men who knew that their wives were burning incense to other gods, along with all the women who were present.”

In verses 16-17 they completely denounce Jeremiah and the Lord. They will not listen to the words of the Lord and they will live as they please. They will serve whatever gods they desire to serve. They will burn incense to the Queen of Heaven and pour out drink offerings to her just as their forefathers, officers, and kings had done. The Queen of Heaven probably referred to the Assyrian-Babylonian goddess Ishtar who was known by this title. She was a goddess of fertility probably meaning that her worshippers engaged in many bizarre immoral fertility rites as practiced among the Canaanites. The goddess Ashtoreth was the Canaanite equivalent of the Assyrian-Babylonian goddess Ishtar. Phillip Hyatt calls attention to the fact that since the Queen of Heaven was the goddess of fertility and of women that the women among the Jews were especially loyal to her. (Hyatt, 1956, p. 874.)

An interesting claim is made in verse 17b that it was because of their loyalty to the Queen of Heaven and their worship of her that they had prospered in the past. When they denounced that idolatrous worship, probably at the time of the reforms of Josiah, they claimed that their prosperity ceased. Verse 19 tells of the women claiming that their husbands had approved their actions. The worship of some of these pagan deities required that vows be made, and according to the

Law, Num. 30:7-15, a wife could not make a vow without the consent of her husband. This is strong evidence of the strength of their syncretistic worship – the mixing of the practices of multiple religions so that no one religion maintains its unique identity.

It cannot be denied that during the reign of some of Israel's most evil kings, and at times when the prophets of God most strongly denounced the people for their sin, there was great material prosperity both personally and nationally. Amos and Hosea both attest to this prosperity and archaeological findings have confirmed these statements. To the people of Jeremiah's day this was an unanswerable challenge to the sovereignty of the Lord and a strong defense of their worship of the Queen of Heaven. The problem was that they attributed this prosperity to the worship of the pagan deities. Therefore the refugees did not consider the destruction of Jerusalem and their own peril as a consequence of their own evil behavior and departure from the Lord, but to their failure to properly sacrifice to the Queen of Heaven to whom they had made their vow. Prosperity, though it may be blessed by the Lord, is not the assurance of God's approval of one's life or of the life of a nation. Nor is poverty an indication of the disapproval of the Lord.

### **Jeremiah's final condemnation of the refugees. 44:20-30.**

In verses 20-23 Jeremiah again argues that the peril being experienced by the people was brought on by their disobedience to the Lord, burning incense to pagan gods, and breaking the covenant. In this condemnation he addresses both men and women.

In verses 24-28 he makes his final statement to all of the people including the women who had burned incense. His condemnation and explanations were really no different from the statements he had made during his entire ministry. The people had made vows to burn incense to the Queen of Heaven, and Jeremiah has to deal with this on both a personal and national level. There is a note of sorrow and sarcasm in what he says in verse 25b when he faces the hopelessness (personal failure?) of his own work in attempting to bring God's people to repentance. He says, "Go ahead then, do what you promised! Keep your vows! But hear the word of the Lord, all Jews living in Egypt: 'I swear by my great name,' says the Lord, 'that no one from Judah living anywhere in Egypt will ever again invoke my names or swear, "As surely as the sovereign Lord lives.'" Judah would suffer complete destruction and only a few fugitives from Egypt would return to the land. We must always keep the door open for the repentance of the people, just as the Lord has done throughout the book.

In the final verse of this section Jeremiah says that the Lord would give them a sign of his anger and total displeasure. He would hand over Pharaoh Hophra (named Apries, 589-570 B.C.) to the enemies who seek his life, in the same way as he did with Zedekiah. He was the Pharaoh who had promised Zedekiah help at the time of his revolt against Nebuchadnezzar. Notice that Jeremiah did not specify that Pharaoh would be handed over to Nebuchadnezzar, but simply to his enemies who seek to take his life. Thompson gives interesting information concerning the reign and finally the death of Pharaoh Hophra. "In 570 B.C. toward the end of his reign there was a rebellion against him among some sections of the army on the occasion of a war in Libya. General Amasis was sent to quell the revolt, but Amasis was proclaimed king and reigned alongside Hophra. After three years Hophra was executed. It is not known whether Jeremiah lived to see these events." (Thompson, 1980, p. 682.)

## Chapter XIV

### Oracles Against the Nations (I)

45:1—49:39

#### Introduction

The lengthy prose section beginning with chapter 32 comes to an end at 46:2. From 46:3 through 51:58 we have the final poetic section. From 51:59 to the end of the book the writer returns to prose as he describes again the fall of Jerusalem. Chapter 52 appears to be a combination of the information in II Kings 25, II Chronicles 36, and Jeremiah 39. The oracle against Babylon (50:1—51:64) will be treated separately because of its uniqueness and its detail.

Jeremiah 45 is a sort of introduction to chapters 46-51 which give the oracles against the surrounding nations. This would place it in 605/604 B.C. which is the time when Nebuchadnezzar defeated Egypt and the Assyrian remnant at the Battle of Carchemish. This battle turned the tide of history in the Middle East, deciding who would be the successor-empire to the Assyrians. The Egyptians controlled portions of Syria and Palestine and had an army stationed at Carchemish, Syria. In 605/604 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar's army decisively defeated Pharaoh Neco sending him home to Egypt. Neco's final act of domination of Palestine came when he deposed Jehoahaz replacing him with Eliakim whose name he changed to Jehoiakim (II Kgs. 23:31-35). According to Jer. 45:1 the date of the brief encounter between Jeremiah and Baruch took place in the fourth year of the reign of Jehoiakim. It is therefore reasonable to say that, from a chronological viewpoint, chapters 45-51 should be placed in the context of chapter 36 which also took place during the fourth year of Jehoiakim's reign.

The eleven years of Jehoiakim's reign were filled with confusion, invasion, war, and insecurity. Jeremiah had not brought encouraging news to Jehoiakim, but predicted the fall of Jerusalem and Judah if the people did not repent and turn back to the Lord. The destruction of Jeremiah's scroll also occurred in the fourth year of Jehoiakim's reign. Nebuchadnezzar invaded the land and Jehoiakim was forced to change his allegiance from Egypt to Babylon, becoming a vassal of Nebuchadnezzar. Three years later Jehoiakim rebelled against Babylon, only to bring the allied armies of Nebuchadnezzar, Syria, Moab, and Ammon to invade Judah. At that time Jehoiakim was made prisoner and taken to Babylon. See II Kgs. 23:36—24:6 and II Chron. 36:5-8. All of this was certainly a great discouragement to Jeremiah and Baruch.

Oracles against certain foreign nations appear in almost every prophetic book of the Old Testament. Various psalms were also written as both prayers and oracles against enemy nations with petitions to the Lord for the enemies to be defeated and punished. In each of these there is the unspoken truth of the sovereignty of God. Although the Lord used pagan nations to punish his own people, he also used one pagan nation as a means of punishing another pagan nation. The book of Habakkuk expresses this principle very effectively. Keown, *et al.* in their commentary on Jeremiah say that the purpose of such oracles is threefold: "(1) to pronounce doom on a foreign nation, sometimes for mistreatment of Israel; (2) to serve as a salvation oracle or oracle of encouragement for Israel; (3) to warn Israel about depending on foreign alliances for their security." (Keown, *et al.*, 1995, on CD.) The collection of these oracles in chapters 46-51 appears in

the LXX following 25:13. In each of the oracles against the various nations we must keep in mind that God has said that he uses evil nations to punish other evil nations and, as in the case of Israel and Judah, he used Assyria and Babylon for this purpose. Sometimes these pagan rulers and their nations were referred to as the servants of the Lord.

### **God's message to Baruch. 45:1-5**

Verse 1 identifies the time as the fourth year of the reign of Jehoiakim. We accept the dating in the text although there is wide variation among scholars concerning the date. Hyatt cites a number of scholars who reject that date because they believe the content of chapter 45 is characteristic of a much later time in Jeremiah's ministry. Hyatt also takes this position. (Hyatt, 1956, pp. 1101-1102.) On the other hand, Thompson considers chapter 45 as "a kind of appendix that belongs with ch. 36, and is valuable for the insight it gives into Baruch's own life." (Thompson, 1980, p. 683.) Bright, Harrison, and others concur with Thompson on this. (Bright, 1965, p. 185, and Harrison, 1973, on CD, Keown *et al.*, 1995, on CD.) Since the book is certainly not chronologically arranged, we do no violence to the text by considering it as an appendix to chapter 36. After Baruch read the scroll aloud the secretary and the others were fearful that Jeremiah and Baruch may be killed. Therefore they were told that they must go into hiding. Instead of the messages from Jeremiah bringing repentance it was destined to bring hostility. Jehoiakim destroyed Jeremiah's scroll and Baruch had to rewrite it as Jeremiah dictated it again.

After the introduction to this oracle, verse 1 tells us that these things took place after he had written the words of Jeremiah on the scroll, probably referring to the rewriting of the scroll. See Jer. 36:27-32. Verse 3 shows that those events were very discouraging to Baruch. In this brief chapter we see that Baruch had a great deal in common with Jeremiah in his sorrow for the people of Judah. He expresses this in verse 3 by saying, "The Lord has added sorrow to my pain; I am worn out with groaning and find no rest."

In verse 4 the Lord speaks to Baruch through Jeremiah saying that he will overthrow what he has built and uproot what he had planted. This is a symbolic statement which goes back to the language of Jeremiah's call in 1:11 emphasizing the Lord's determination to punish Judah to the fullest. There seems to be a note of finality in the words of the Lord. Hope is now gone; only punishment is in store. This hopelessness creates a connection between chapters 44 and 45. Although we want to sympathize with Baruch the message is that his role must always be subservient to the grand purposes of the Lord – a lesson which is difficult to learn.

Verse 5 gives God's promise to him that no matter what kind of disasters come, the Lord will always protect him and preserve his life. We see the influence of Jeremiah working in the life and attitude of his scribe. Baruch has appeared sporadically through the book, but only here do we see the character of the man.

### **The oracle against Egypt. 46:1-28**

Linguists consider the literary quality of the poems in chapter 46 to be among the very best in the Old Testament. Verses 1-2 serve as a superscription to the revelation of the oracles against the nations. The background for the first oracle is Nebuchadnezzar's defeat of Egypt at the Battle of

Carchemish (605/604 B.C.) but the date when the oracles were given is the fourth year of Jehoiakim. Phillip Hyatt refers to the writings of W.F. Albright describing archaeological excavations at Carchemish which uncovered a building occupied by an Egyptian army. In the building they found numerous Egyptian objects dating to a time just prior to the destruction of the city. The excavations indicated that the city was destroyed about 600 B.C. (Hyatt, 1956, p. 1106.)

After their defeat at Carchemish the Egyptians continued to have some control over parts of Judah, but this was soon brought to an end when Nebuchadnezzar invaded Palestine, making Jehoiakim a vassal and taxing the nation (II Kgs. 24:1). Verses 3-12 give a symbolic description of the Egyptians battling the Babylonians at Carchemish. Verses 3-4 speak of a confident Egyptian army preparing itself for war. They are harnessing their horses, taking their positions in full armor, and polishing their spears. Suddenly however the mood changes in verses 5-6. The question comes, "What do I see?" Instead of a victorious army defeating its enemies it is a terrified army in retreat, fleeing in haste and completely disoriented. So chaotic is it that "the swift cannot flee nor the strong escape. In the north by the River Euphrates they stumble and fall."

Verses 7-8a are really a satire ridiculing Egypt's national pride as she thought of herself as unconquerable yet she was about to be totally defeated by the foe to the north. The Nile overflowing its banks with overwhelming power is the sarcastic symbol used by the prophet. Verses 9-10 speak of the mercenary warriors from Cush (Ethiopia), Put (possibly modern Somalia), and Lydia (probably Libya) allied with the Egyptians. However, they did not consider the fact that the battle belongs to the Lord, not to their own military might. He speaks of the sword devouring its enemies until its thirst for their blood is quenched. The battle of Carchemish ended in the completely humiliating defeat and routing of the Egyptian army. The Lord has had his way "in the land of the north by the River Euphrates."

In verses 11-12 the Egyptians are portrayed as an injured army looking for the balm of Gilead to heal the wounds of war but there is no healing for them. Instead of victory or healing there is the shame of Egypt which is now heard by all nations. One warrior will stumble over another, and both will fall. The healing power of the balm of Gilead was well known, but it was not to be found by the wounded Egyptians. Even the expression "O Virgin Daughter of Egypt" carries a strong sarcastic note as a contemptible reminder of the Lord's description of Israel as the virgin daughter of my people (see 14:17, 18:13, 31:4). All of this ridicules the arrogant pride of Egypt. Between 609 and 605 Egypt gained control over Gilead when she dominated other portions of Syria-Palestine, but the defeat at Carchemish ended much of their power.

Verses 13-24 form a second poem and oracle. Verse 13 introduces the oracle as "the message of the Lord . . . about the coming of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon to attack Egypt." In verses 14-16 he says that the message that war is coming should be announced in Migdol, Memphis, and Tahpanhes. The Babylonians are going to invade. Most scholars believe that an interval of time intervened between the first and second oracles. In August 605 B.C. Nabopolassar the father of Nebuchadnezzar died and his son, who was in Syria hurried back to Babylon to take over the throne. He resumed his attacks on Egypt shortly after that. In 604 B.C. the Babylonians sacked the Philistine city of Ashkelon. The Babylonian Chronicle states that in 601 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar confronted the Egyptians again in another fierce battle. Other documents indicate that the battle ended in severe losses for both nations, and neither could be considered victorious.

In verse 15 in the NIV and other English translations we see “warriors,” “valiant men,” or “mighty men.” In the RSV and NRSV the name of the god Apis occurs. This occurs because of a peculiarity of the arrangement of the letters of the Hebrew word, and is thought of as a play on words meaning “mighty warrior” and “Apis.” The god Apis was a young bull worshipped by the Egyptians as a god of fertility. The sense of the passage seems to be, “Why has your god (Apis) forsaken you? Why do your mighty warriors flee?” Under the pressure of battle the Egyptian army as well as the mercenaries turned and fled, stumbling over each other in their retreat. They turned against Pharaoh, calling him a “wind bag,” and a “loud mouth” and returned to their own countries.

In verse 18 the true King, the Lord, speaks. He describes the one who will come as a strong mountain like Mt. Tabor and Mt. Carmel. There can be little doubt that he is speaking of the king of Babylon who will invade Egypt. The message of the King (the Lord) to Egypt is simple; defeat and exile await you at the hands of Babylon, so you are just as well to pack your belongings and get ready. Memphis, the capital will be laid waste. This message is speaking of the condemnation of Egypt, but to the Jews who later fled to Egypt to escape Babylonian exile this reality must have been grim indeed. They defied the warnings of the prophet of the Lord, only to find that they had not enhanced their plight, but had made a bad situation worse.

Verses 20-24 describe Egypt as a beautiful heifer. In this introductory statement we may have a sort of play on words again. The god Apis was a strong bull but there is a gadfly which is coming from the north. The gadfly is a large fly which bites animals, particular horses and cattle and is sometimes called a horsefly. It seems that the writer has in mind that the “mighty” bull, Apis, will be attacked by an “insignificant” bug from the north. The irony is that the pest from the north will completely conquer Apis, the sacred bull of Egypt. The mercenaries in the Egyptian armies are described as fattened calves, no doubt describing their special treatment among the Egyptians and as calves ready for slaughter. They will not stand their ground but will flee because they know that disaster is coming. The lovely heifer of Egypt has now become a fleeing hissing snake and the lush forests of Egypt are to be chopped down with axes. There is no escape because the invaders are as numerous as locusts. Swarms of locusts and their devastation of crops were well known to the Egyptians. Egypt will be put to shame and will come under the control of the people out of the north.

Verses 25-26 tell of the punishment in store for Amon, the deity of Thebes (also known as No). Thebes was the capital of Upper (southern) Egypt at this time. Amon later merged with Re, and the god became known as Amon-Re. He was the king of the gods and the god of the rulers of Egypt. The scene shifting from Memphis in the north to Thebes in the south shows the extent of Nebuchadnezzar’s conquest of Egypt. However, there is little historical data on this.

But who is meant by “those who trust in Pharaoh” (46:25)? Some commentators believe he is speaking of the Egyptians and others believe he is also including the Jews who are in Egypt. Still others believe this oracle is addressed to the pro-Egyptian party of Jews who fled to Egypt to avoid punishment for their crimes in Mizpah. (Keown, *et al.*, 1995 on CD.) The tool of the Lord’s punishment will be the Babylonians who are frequently referred to as “the foe from the north.”

It is a surprise that the promise to the Egyptians of restoration is given at this point. See Ezek. 29:13-16 for similar information. Relatively little is known about an exile or scattering of the Egyptians at this time. In the oracles against Egypt it is noteworthy that nothing is said about any kind of abuse or mistreatment of Israel by the Egyptians. The pro-Egyptian party which fled to Egypt seems to have been reasonably well treated with the exception of the Elephantine Colony. Because of the Jewish loyalty to Jerusalem some of the Egyptians looked on the Elephantine Colony with suspicion. By 525 B.C. the Jews at Elephantine had built a temple of their own even though this was contrary to Jewish orthodoxy. A political disturbance in Egypt around 410-408 B.C. resulted in the destruction of the Elephantine Jewish temple by the opposing Egyptians.

Verses 27-28 occur with little variation in 30:10-11. See the comments on those verses.

### **The oracle against the Philistines. 47:1-7**

The catastrophes which would overtake Philistia would come from the waters “rising from the north” (47:2) no doubt referring to Babylon. From the time of David forward Philistia had played a relatively minor role in the history of Israel. For that reason it is difficult to understand why it should be included in the oracles against the nations. Only here and in 25:20 are the Philistines mentioned in the book.

The structure of verse 1 is similar to that of other oracles. It is dated “before Pharaoh attacked Gaza.” We do not know when Pharaoh attacked Gaza, but one possibility is just after the Battle of Carchemish in 605/604 B.C. This is the time when Neco deposed Jehoahaz (II Kgs. 23:31-35) and it is possible that he also fought against Gaza at that time. Some argue that this could have taken place in 601 B.C. when the armies of Nebuchadnezzar and Pharaoh Neco battled each other to a stalemate. As mentioned above, both armies suffered enormous casualties and Nebuchadnezzar had to return to Babylon to reconstitute and reequip his army. Perhaps the armies of Neco fought against Gaza at that time. Still others argue that Neco battled Gaza in 609 B.C. when he was going north and encountered Josiah at Megiddo.

In verse 2 “the waters rising from the north” is similar to the expression in Is. 8:7-8 where the Lord speaks of Assyria. The overflowing of the Nile was mentioned in reference to Egypt, and probably this is in Jeremiah’s mind as he describes the coming demise of Philistia. The towns of Philistia and their inhabitants will be engulfed in this deluge of power and the people will cry out but to no avail.

Verse 3 describes the warfare. The noise of Pharaoh’s cavalry and his chariots will be heard. These attacks will be so severe that fathers will abandon their children. Verse 4 unites the Phoenician seaports of Tyre and Sidon in some way with the Philistine cities. According to Jer. 27:3 Tyre and Sidon had alliances with some Transjordanian nations but we have no information about an alliance with the Philistines. The prophet says that “the Lord is about to destroy the Philistines” referring also to Caphtor. This is thought to have been the place from which the Philistines came. It is frequently limited to the island of Crete, but many scholars believe that it should include all of the Aegean Islands.

Verse 5 says that the mourning of the people of Gaza would be expressed by their shaving their heads and cutting their bodies. Cutting oneself was frequently practiced among pagan nations when they were in extreme danger, or when they were desperately asking their god for a favor. The worshippers of Baal did this at Mt. Carmel, I Kgs. 18:27-28. In Deut. 14:1 the Lord forbade those practices among the Israelites.

Verses 6-7 show the symbol of destruction as the sword of the Lord. The Philistines cry out for the sword of the Lord to return to its scabbard as they lament over their circumstances. The prophet replies to this outcry by asking a rhetorical question, "How can it rest since the Lord has commanded it?" The Babylonian Chronicle states that Ashkelon, a Philistine city on the Mediterranean coast was attacked and placed under siege and finally destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar in December 604 B.C. (Bright, 1965, p. 312.) The ruins of Ashkelon can be seen today.

### **The oracle against Moab. 48:1-47**

Moab was situated on the east shore of the Dead Sea and south of Ammon. Its traditional northern border was the Arnon River and its southern border was the Zered River. Their northern neighbor was the Ammonites and that border was not stable. Some of the towns mentioned in the oracle lay north of the Arnon River, and were sometime considered Moabite towns, but at other times they were considered Ammonite territory. The country of Moab is a high plateau. Its western border drops off sharply to the shore of the Dead Sea some 2000 feet (610 m.) below. The Dead Sea is 1290 feet (393 m.) below sea level. The people of Moab traced their origin to Lot (Gen. 19:37), and are thought to have been usually friendly toward the descendants of Jacob. Naomi found it to be a hospitable country (Ruth 1:1-2). This however, was not always the case, e.g. II Sam. 8:12, I Kgs. 1:1, 3:5-26. After the events of Gen. 19:30-37 they are mentioned in Gen. 36:35 but we hear nothing about them again until Ex. 15:15 in the Song of Moses. In Num. 21-25 we have the account of Balak, king of Moab, asking Balaam to curse the people of Israel. The Moabite women seduced the men of Israel, accomplishing for Balak that which Balaam could not do.

An important archaeological discovery took place in August, 1868 when an Arab showed F.A. Klein, a German missionary working Moab, an inscribed slab of stone measuring 3 feet 10 inches (1.17 m.) high, 2 feet (.61m.) wide, and 10 inches (25 cm.) thick. Both German and French consular officials expressed very strong interest in the find and Clermont-Ganneau, a French archaeologist saw it and made a cast of its text. The Arab, sensing the value of the stone, thought he could make more money off it if it was broken into pieces and each piece sold separately. The Arab thought that possession of pieces of the stone might enhance one's harvest of wheat or other crops. Breaking the stone mutilated the inscription, but the cast which had been made earlier enabled scholars to reconstruct almost the complete text. Fortunately most of the pieces were later recovered by the French and the stone was cemented together. It is now in the Louvre in Paris. A portion of the inscription tells of a number of encounters which Mesha, king of Moab had with Israel, particularly mentioning both Omri and Ahab, kings of Israel. Mesha believed that the god Chemosh had been punishing Moab and its king's lack of devotion. See II Kgs. 3:4-5. (Barton, 1916, pp. 460-462 and Pfeiffer, 1966, pp. 396-397.)



Moab had various confrontations with the Ammonites and also with the Assyrians. At times they were tributaries to the Israelites. With the collapse of the Assyrian Empire in 612 B.C. Moab regained its independence but Nebuchadnezzar subdued them in about 581 B.C. It is interesting that in II Kgs. 24:1-2 the Ammonites, Syrians, and Moabites appear to be allied with Babylon in their attack on Jehoiakim, king of Judah because of his rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar. In Jer. 27:1-11 the prophet counseled a group of nations including Moab not to rebel against the Babylonians. All of these things lead us to believe that the history of Moab's relationship with Babylon was very inconsistent. When the Babylonian Empire fell to the Cyrus (539 B.C.), the Persians soon dominated Moab.

The oracle against Moab is made up of a group of poems, considered by some to be separate oracles. There are numerous parallels to portions of the oracles in Isaiah causing many scholars to believe that Jeremiah (or another writer) had collected much of this material from that source. In length, the oracle(s) against Moab is second only to that against Babylon. We will take the oracle in sections.

### **Moab will be destroyed. 48:1-10**

This oracle begins with the word "Woe!" Nebo is first mentioned but this probably is not Mt. Nebo which Moses ascended just prior to Israel entering Canaan, but the city of Nebo mentioned in Num. 32:3, 38 and I Chron. 5:8. The capture of Nebo is recorded on the Moabite Stone. Kir-iathaim was a town east of the Jordan occupied by some of the Rubenites (Num. 32:27 and Josh. 13:15-19) and it too is mentioned in the inscriptions on the Moabite Stone as an important city of Moab. It is thought to have been located about 5 miles northwest of Dibon, one of Moab's important cities. These cities will be destroyed.

In verse 2 the city of Heshbon is mentioned. It had been the capital city of Sihon, king of the Amorites (Num. 21:25-30). It was in Heshbon that the destruction of Moab was being planned. It is mentioned also on the Moabite Stone. Next is the city of Madmen, but its location has never been established. Bright says that the Hebrew word may mean "dung heap" but this is not certain. (Bright, 1965, p. 319.) Next is the city of Horonaim in verse 3. It too is mentioned on the Moabite Stone but we do not know its location. Next we have Luhith in the 5<sup>th</sup> verse. Its location is also unknown.

After calling attention to all of these cities Jeremiah says that they, with their god Chemosh will go into exile. It is unique that in a relatively insignificant nation such as Moab so many specific cities are named. Perhaps it is because with each one the prophet adds a descriptive phrase about the cries, the peril, the sorrow, and the suffering which is anticipated by Jeremiah. When taken together, these phrases give a vivid picture of the hazards to be faced by the Moabites in the near future. Some of these phrases are, "disgraced and captured," "disgraced and shattered," "put an end to the nation," "will be silenced," "the sword will pursue you," "great havoc and destruction," "her little ones will cry out," "weeping bitterly," "anguished cries," "flee, run for your lives," "your god Chemosh will go into exile," "the destroyer will come against every town," "the valley will be ruined and the plateau destroyed," "her towns will become desolate." Chemosh was the national god of Moab and had been venerated by the Syrians and Mesopotamians as far back as the third millennium B.C. No greater insult could have come than to see their

god go into exile. When captives were taken by a captor the exiles would frequently carry small shrines of their gods into captivity with them.

### **Moab's complacency. 48:11-17**

It is impossible to know whether each of these sections is designed as a separate oracle or simply a shift in subject matter. This oracle may be separate from 48:1-10. It gives us a picture of Moab's complacent feeling and their misplaced sense of security. In some ways this parallels Jeremiah's condemnation of Judah at various times. Moab was located apart from the normal route taken by invading nations, and had not experienced strong domination or control from a foreign nation or exile as Judah and Israel had. Most, though not all of their trouble came from periodic incursions from Ammon, Israel, and other minor powers around her. This apparently led to a feeling of safety and complacency. The opening of verse 11 says, "Moab has been at rest from her youth." The prophet compares this to wine left on its lees, the sediment which results from the fermentation process. To properly care for the wine it remains on its lees for a period and is then poured from jar to jar as the process of aging continues.

Verses 11-12 form an appropriate simile because Moab was known for its vineyards and fine wine. Excellent results come from giving close attention and care to the fermenting wine. The symbolism is that Moab had not experienced what wine experiences as it is poured from jar to jar. Moab as a nation had settled quietly on its "lees," but had not been disturbed by pouring from jar to jar. Moab had not been exiled by multiple nations ("poured from one jar to another") but it had been a nation with minimum international problems. As she has been in the past, so she will be in the future – at least this is what she seems to have thought. Verse 13 says that someone is going to come however and "tilt" her jars and pour her out. The tilters were the men who poured the wine from one jar into another. Her old jar – her previous setting – will not be repeated. Instead her previous life (jars) will be smashed and she will be ashamed of her god Chemosh. Moab will be treated in the same way as Israel has been treated. The expression is made in this verse, "when they trusted in Bethel," no doubt referring to the time when Jeroboam I set up the calves in Bethel and Dan at the time of the division of the kingdom. The Assyrians came and destroyed Samaria in 722 B.C. and Israel came face to face with the fact that the gods of Bethel were no gods at all.

Verses 14-17 describe the destruction of Moab. "The fall of Moab is at hand; her calamity will come quickly." Her days of greatness are behind her. "How broken is the mighty scepter, how broken her glorious staff." She has lost her independence forever.

### **The destruction of Moab's cities. 48:18-47**

The proud rulers of Moab are to be brought down from their positions to sit on the parched ground, symbolic of their humiliation. The inhabitants of the daughter of Dibon are the ones being addressed. Dibon was the capital of Moab, and the expression "daughter of . . ." in addressing a nation or its people was common among the prophets, especially Jeremiah. Usually it is used in referring to Israel and Judah, but it is also occurs referring to Egypt, Babylon, and other countries. It was in Dibon that the Moabite Stone was found in 1868. In verse 19 the city of Aroer is mentioned. It was located on the north bank of the Arnon River, the northern border

with Ammon. As stated above, the northern borders of Moab shifted from time to time because of the incursions of Ammon and others.

Verses 20-24 give a list of various Moabite cities and towns in order to demonstrate the thoroughness of the destruction which was coming. In verse 25 he describes this as the amputation or cutting off her horn and breaking her arm. The “horn” and “arm” are metaphors used among the ancients to describe one’s power and might. Moab’s past power will be demolished. In verses 26-28 we have a disgusting pictorial description of the humiliation of Moab. Her destruction is put in terms of her being drunk, having a “hangover,” and wallowing in her own vomit, thus being the object of ridicule. Description of drunkenness is frequently used as a symbol of God’s wrath toward a nation. There are two reasons given for this humiliation. First, Israel had been the object of Moab’s ridicule in the past and second she had been arrogant toward God (vs. 27-31). Jeremiah says that the Lord wails and cries out over Moab. A number of descriptive statements are made to describe her pride and arrogance. In spite of this the Lord expresses his sorrow at the final plight of the Moabites.

Verses 32-34 continue the description of God’s sorrow and the coming destruction of the cities of Moab. Her ripened grapes and fruit are gone; there is no more joy and gladness to be heard. Her orchards and fields are gone; there is no more wine flowing from the winepresses. There are shouts, but they are not shouts of joy. They are sounds of crying from her cities. Once again a whole group of cities is mentioned to show the extent of the destruction.

Verses 35-39 say that their sacrifices will end, apparently referring to those in Moab who might have worshipped the Lord at one time. It is not unthinkable that some Israelites would have taken up residence in Moab. The story of Ruth affirms this in the days of the judges. In private homes as well as on the streets the cries are heard (vss. 37-39). Ultimately Moab is becoming the object of ridicule as her strongholds are taken and the hearts of her warriors become weak.

In verses 40-44 the prophet speaks of an eagle swooping down to find its prey in Moab. This is symbolic of the death of the nation. She has become food for the birds. There is no escape. Those who try to flee will fall into the pit, and those who climb out of the pit will be caught in a snare. A snare refers to ancient traps or nets used to catch birds of prey and some animals. This is the year of punishment for Moab.

Verses 45-46 reflect a great deal of the content of an Israelite poem written during the exodus from Egypt. Heshbon had been a city of Moab but Sihon, king of the Amorites had fought against the king of Moab and captured much of his land including the city of Heshbon. During the wilderness wanderings Israel came to the land of Moab bordering on Ammon and the Amorite kingdom of Sihon. The king of the Amorites would not allow Israel to pass through his land, and a battle ensued. The Amorites retreated and Israel occupied many of their towns including Heshbon. An Israelite poet wrote a song of Heshbon, Num. 21:23-31, and Jeremiah’s oracle in Jer. 48:45-46 against Heshbon has some striking similarities to that passage. Chemosh their god would be unable to defend them. Their sons would be taken into captivity. The statement of Jer. 48:47 is unexpected. In it the prophet says that the Lord will restore the fortunes of Moab at sometime in the future.

### **The oracle against Ammon. 49:1-6**

The Ammonites and the Moabites emerged from the incestuous relationship of Lot with his daughters (Gen. 19:38). Ammon's southern border was with Moab at the Arnon River but the boundaries moved from time to time as the neighbors invaded each other. When the Israelites entered the land the tribe of Reuben settled in much of Ammon, and the Ammonites were forced to move northward. Milcom was the national god of the Ammonites. He is the Ammonite and Canaanite equivalent of Molech. The tribe of Gad lay north of the tribe of Reuben and west of Ammon. In general, Israel's relationship to Ammon was very unfriendly. From the days of the judges through the United Kingdom period and much of the Divided Kingdom period war with Ammon was a rather frequent occurrence. Assyria, under Tiglath-Pileser III (745-727 B.C.) invaded and controlled much of the area of Transjordan (II Kgs. 15:27-29) including Rabbath-Ammon the capital city of Ammon. This is now the city of Amman, the capital of the country of Jordan. Many of the details mentioned in Jeremiah's oracle against Ammon are not referred to in any other part of the Old Testament.

Verse 1 introduces the oracle with the statement that the Lord is speaking. He asks three questions concerning Israel, no doubt referring to the fact that some of the Israelite population of Transjordan was certainly taken captive by the Assyrians referred to in II Kgs. 15:27-29. The tribes of Gad and Reuben had settled in much of the areas which had been occupied by the Ammonites and the Amorites. When people were taken captive by a foreign nation their captivity would frequently be referred to as taking their gods captive. This appears to be the case in verse 1 referring to Molech (Milcom) possessing Gad.

Verse 2 states that the day is coming when Rabbah (Rabbath-Ammon), the capital of the Ammonites will be in ruins and the surrounding villages will be burned. Historically we do not know when Israel took possession of this area. In verse 3 the city of Ai is mentioned but we know nothing of a Moabite city by that name, and the context does not allow this to be Ai near Bethel so we have no information about this. The statement is that Molech will go into exile along with his priests and officials.

Verses 4-5 describe the complacency of Ammon in much the same way as the complacency of Moab was described. Each of these nations considered themselves secure with no worries of invasion and destruction. The Lord predicts the downfall of "all those around you. . . Every one of you will be driven away and no one will gather the fugitives." Verse 6 gives the unusual promise of restoration as was the case with Moab.

### **The oracle against Edom. 49:7-22**

The Edomites were descendants of Esau the twin brother of Jacob. The country of Edom was located south of Judah, extending down to the Gulf of Aqaba although its southern boundaries were somewhat unstable. Israel had a long history of friction and war with Edom dating back to the time of Israel's exodus from Egypt (Num. 20:14-21). This hostility continued throughout their Old Testament history although there was at least one period of cooperation between Israel, Judah, and Edom as in II Kgs. 3:1-9 when they fought against Moab. However, when Nebu-

chadnezzar invaded Palestine Edom gave no assistance to Judah, and may have been assisting the Babylonians. See Ps. 137:7.

In verse 7 Jeremiah's oracle begins with the familiar introduction that this is the word of the Lord followed by questions apparently designed to arouse the specter of doom for Edom. In one sense these are all rhetorical questions – the answers are obvious – yet the answers are also somewhat obscure. The questions emphasize that a nation which once was noted for its wisdom now goes down with the foolish. Those who offered counsel have failed to heed their own advice.

The country had agricultural land and it controlled one of the main north-south routes with access to the Gulf of Aqaba through Ezion-Geber, its seaport. Teman was one of its important cities and it was known for its wisdom. No doubt the city of Teman is used here to identify the entire country of Edom. The people of Dedan are told to flee and hide in caves because the Lord is going to punish Esau. The city of Dedan was not really part of Edom, but was located southeast of Edom in Arabia. The oracle however warns them to flee as well. Some commentators believe that there might have been some Dedanites living in Edom and that this was a warning specifically to them as well as the Edomites.

In verses 9-11 he asks a question about grape pickers and thieves. If grape pickers were stealing grapes they would not steal the entire crop, and if thieves broke into a house they would steal only what they wanted or needed. (Also see Obad. 5-6.) However, when Edom is destroyed it will be completely destroyed. She will be stripped and her hiding places will be revealed. Children, relatives, and neighbors will all perish. The Lord tells them to leave their orphans and widows – he will take care of them.

Verses 12-13 constitute a brief prose section speaking of drinking the cup. This expression was used among some of the ancient people to speak of a person who is forced to accept punishment for his actions. However, with the destruction of Edom he asks why the innocent should be punished with the guilty. The observation appears to be that even those not guilty (children and widows) will have to suffer. That being true, how do you who are guilty expect to be spared? Bozrah was the capital and most important city of Edom. To emphasize his determination to punish Edom's evil the Lord swears by himself that even Bazrah will not escape.

Verses 14-16 are closely paralleled in Obad. 1-4. Envoys carry the message to the nations to attack Edom. Although she was renowned for her hidden strongholds in the mountains (verse 16), she would be brought low. This is generally thought to have been the mountains and strongholds around Sela, in the vicinity of Petra. This is very rugged mountainous terrain which was thought to have been almost impregnable. However, verse 17 says that she will become the object of horror, be destroyed as Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed, and people would scoff at its ruins. No one will live there any longer. Verses 19-22 describe the extent of the destruction and God's determination to do this. No one will prevent him from carrying out his purposes. Verse 18 closely parallels 50:40, and verse 19 closely parallels 50:44, both of which are parts of the oracle against Babylon.

### **The oracle against Damascus. 49:23-27**

This brief oracle describes the Lord's intent to punish the city of Damascus. The city's name probably stands for the nation of Syria. Two cities, Hamath and Arpad are also mentioned in verse 23. Hamath was located on the Orontes River about 110 miles (177 km.) north of Damascus and Arpad was about 50 miles (80 km.) southwest of Carchemish. There appears to have been some degree of independence which these cities enjoyed although that is not detailed. Thompson refers to them as city-states based on the references to them in some Assyrian texts. Between 738 and 732 B.C. all three of these cities fell to Tiglath-Pileser III, king of Assyria. In 720 B.C., just two years after the fall of Samaria, Sargon II had to crush a rebellion in Damascus. In 612 B.C., after the destruction of Nineveh and the collapse of the Assyrian Empire, these cities appear to have gained some degree of independence but after the battle of Carchemish in 605 B.C. they became vassals of the Babylonians. (Thompson, 1980, pp. 723-275.)

In verse 23 Jeremiah speaks of some demoralizing bad news which the people of Damascus had received. Damascus, once a strong opponent of Israel had become weak and feeble, and its people had turned to flee. No doubt Babylon was her aggressor since Nebuchadnezzar was known to have conquered most of Syria. However, in II Kgs. 24:2 the Arameans (Syrians) joined Nebuchadnezzar in crushing Jehoiakim's rebellion against Babylonian domination. The lament of verses 25-26 appears to be coming from the mouths of her inhabitants who cherished the joy and pride of their city. Now their young men fall in the streets and the soldiers are silenced. Verse 27 says that the Lord is determined to set fire to the city. Also see Am. 1:4. The name Ben-Hadad is a throne name for the kings of Syria similar to that of Pharaoh in Egypt. The name means "Son of Hadad." The god Hadad was the Syrian equivalent of the Canaanite god Baal, god of storms, rain, and fertility.

### **The oracle against Kedar and Hazor. 49:28-33**

The Syrian desert north and east of Palestine was the home of various Arab tribes. Many of them were marauding tribes which made incursions into various settled areas of Syria and Palestine carrying off plunder. In the Old Testament the men of Kedar (sometimes Qedar) were known to be sheep breeders (Is. 60:7) and traders with Phoenicia (Ezek. 27:21). In Isaiah's oracle against Arabia (Is. 21:13-17) he mentions the people of Tema and the Dedanites who also lived in Arabia. These people were a constant threat to those in settled areas as in Judges 6:1-6 where the Midianites and Amalekites are shown to be marauding people. Kedar was an area fairly well known, but Hazor presents a different situation. It certainly was not referring to the city in Galilee near the Waters of Merom, but its location is not known.

In verse 28 the Lord tells Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians to arise and attack Kedar and destroy the people of the East. This is a general expression probably referring to the various tribes of Bedouins in the Syro-Arabian desert. Some of these tribes are mentioned in various Assyrian documents. They are warned of "terror on every side," and told to flee quickly for shelter.

Verses 29-33 describe the particulars of the destruction awaiting the people of Kedar and Hazor. They live with a false sense of security supposing nothing evil or destructive can come to them but they are not aware that they are about to be destroyed. Everything they have including their

camels and their herds will become booty for the aggressors. Taking their camels would have been especially important to the desert dwellers because camels were the chief means of caravan trade in the Arabian Peninsula and they were also used in desert warfare. They were so important that they are mentioned in Assyrian documents as acceptable substitutes for tribute money to be paid to a conqueror. The people and their possessions will be scattered to the winds and disaster will come on them from every side. Hazor will become a place for the animals (jackals) and will be desolate forever. No man will dwell there. All of these terms are common expressions in the Old Testament to describe the massive extent of destruction. They are usually symbolic, and should not always be taken literally.

### **The oracle against Elam. 49:34-39**

This oracle came to Jeremiah “early in the reign of Zedekiah.” In some translations this appears as “in the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah.” This is thought by some to have been the year of his accession, 597 B.C. The nation of Elam was located directly east of Babylon in the southwestern part of modern day Iran. In ancient times it was an important component of the lower Mesopotamian nations. The Assyrians and Elamites had many conflicts, and in about 640 B.C. the Assyrians under Ashurbanipal conquered Elam and destroyed Susa its capital. In 612 B.C. however Nineveh fell to the Medes and Babylonians bringing the Assyrian Empire to an end. Following that event Elam seems to have enjoyed a brief period of independence. A broken portion of the Babylonian Chronicle may indicate that Babylon and Elam had a conflict about 596-594 B.C. when Elam attempted to advance into Babylon. If this is correct, it means that Jeremiah’s oracle (597 B.C.) came shortly before to the Elamite-Babylonian conflict of 596-594 B.C.

In verses 35-37 the Lord speaks of “the bow of Elam,” probably indicating that skilled archers were the mainstay of their army. The people of Elam will be scattered to the four winds, an expression frequently used to describe widespread dispersing of a population. The dispersing of the nation will be so complete that they will be in every corner of the world. The Lord will pursue them with the sword until they have come to an end. Her king and officials will be destroyed.

In the conclusion of the oracle we have a statement similar to the one with Moab, 48:47. “Yet I will restore the fortunes of Elam in days to come,” 49:39. Comments such as these are thought by many commentators to have been added by a later editor, but there is no objective evidence of this.

## **Chapter XV**

### **Oracles Against the Nations (II)**

**50:1—51:64**

#### **Introduction**

The oracle against Babylon is the ninth and last of the group, and it is almost as long as all of the others combined. This is not surprising when we realize that the Babylonians exerted far greater power and influence in the Middle East than any of the countries discussed in the previous chapters. The defeat of the Egyptians and the remnant of the Assyrian army at the Battle of Carchemish in 605 B.C. was the beginning of the rise of Babylon. The personal strength and ability of Nebuchadnezzar and the determination of his armies and his people to dominate their neighbors is evident on every side. He died in 562 B.C. meaning that he reigned about forty-three years. His son Amel-Marduk (Evil-Meradoc) came to the throne in 562 B.C. but in 560 B.C. he was assassinated by his brother-in-law, Neriglissar who assumed the throne. Neriglissar ruled for four years and was followed by his son Labashi-Marduk. He reigned only a few months before being removed by Nabonidus (556-539). Nabonidus neglected his kingly duties, spending most of his time in Arabian resorts leaving his son Belshazzar to carry on the affairs of state. After Nebuchadnezzar the Babylonian Empire lasted only about twenty-three years.

With all of the turmoil and neglect going on in Babylon the populace became very dissatisfied with the state of affairs and the morale of the nation was low. The grandeur of Babylon had long passed. The government had degenerated and was doing nothing to improve the plight of the people and they were ready and anxious for change. This presented the perfect opportunity for the ambitious Persians to come in. The country of Persia was located all along the eastern shore of the Persian Gulf. Cyrus, king of Persia had already conquered Media to the north and some minor kingdoms, and he was ready to expand to the south and take Babylon. Media became the ally of Cyrus and the Persians, and the Medes and Persians were frequently spoken of together as in Dan 5:28 and 6:8-15.

By about 550 B.C. Cyrus had begun expanding his holdings and he or his general Darius invaded Babylon in 539 B.C. At Belshazzar's feast Daniel predicted the fall of Babylon by reading and interpreting the handwriting on the wall, Dan. 5:1-31. The Euphrates River flowed under the wall and through the city of Babylon. A part of the army of Cyrus diverted a portion of the river upstream (to the north of the city) causing the level flowing through the city to fall to about waist high. The Persian soldiers were able to enter the city by wading under the wall. They took the city without a fight, did not damage the city, and treated the people with kindness. Jeremiah makes no mention of the emergence of Cyrus and the Persian, their conquest of the Medes, or their invasion of Babylon.

Basically the oracles against Babylon have two messages: the fall of Babylon and the restoration of the exiled Jews to their homeland. Scholars are in general agreement that chapters 50-51 contain a whole group of oracles which were not composed at the same time. The oracles are not easily divided because there is considerable variety in the structure and content but also a signifi-



cant amount of repetition. This is not surprising when we consider the lack of consistency in structure and unity throughout the book. Scholars vary greatly in the way they divide these oracles and a number of commentators question their authenticity. Some believe that the oracles are the compositions of a variety of writers, and may not have all been from Jeremiah. Others take an extreme position on this. Philip Hyatt expresses this opinion by simply saying “It is unlikely that any part of the collection is from Jeremiah.” (Hyatt, 1956, p. 1123.) This however, we consider to be a radical point of view. These oracles have a great deal of material found in various other parts of Jeremiah and also in parts of Isaiah. Most of the text is so vivid that it needs little commentary.

### **The fall of Babylon and restoration of the exiled Jews. 50:1-16**

We should remember that the name “Babylon” stands not only for the city but also for the Babylonian Empire as a whole just as Jerusalem was not only speaking of the city, but of the nation of Judah. Rather than looking at these poetical statements as literal descriptions of a literal battle which destroyed the city of Babylon, it is best that we look at them both from an ideal perspective and a symbolic perspective. The fall of the Babylonian Empire is the thrust of these oracles. Verse 1 affirms the following oracles to be “the word the Lord spoke through Jeremiah the prophet concerning Babylon and the land of the Babylonians.” The word “Babylonians” is usually translated “Chaldeans.” The Chaldeans descended from seminomadic tribes who settled south of Ur. Nabopolassar, the father of Nebuchadnezzar was a native Chaldean.

In verse 2 the prophet begins to describe the ultimate fall of Babylon mentioning two of their gods, Bel and Marduk. Bel was the god of storms and weather comparable to Baal among the Canaanites and Hadad among the Syrians. His name meant “lord.” Marduk was the chief god of the Babylonians and head of the Babylonian pantheon. Marduk was the “creator god” in the Babylonian Creation Epic emerging as the “king of the gods.” Later Bel and Marduk were thought of as only one god and finally the name Marduk was used almost exclusively. (Keown, *et al.* 1995, on CD.)

In verse 3 the “nation from the north” is not identified in the text. Jeremiah has used this expression to speak of Babylon’s invasion of Judah but here it is applied probably to the Persians. It is not to be interpreted as a literal battle resulting in the destruction of the city since the Persians captured the city without a battle being fought. Although the Persians were east of the Babylonians, the invasion route was from the north. As stated above, the capture of Babylon by the Persians was not a military attack but a quiet entrance into the city under the wall using the diversion of the Euphrates River as their route.

In verses 4-7 the prophet leaves the fall of Babylon to speak of the restoration of both Israel and Judah to their land. See also chapters 30-33. Once again there is the air of optimism as the prophet delivers the Lord’s words. The people will repent, turn back to the Lord, and renew the everlasting covenant. Some commentators relate this to the “new covenant” described in 31:31-34 but this is a misapplication of that passage. In Heb. 8:8-12 the writer of Hebrews defines this more clearly. The people of Judah are described as sheep who followed the wrong shepherd – these were their kings, priests, and prophets who mistakenly assured them of peace and security. In their exile the people of Judah are described as wanderers over the mountains who have for-

gotten their true resting place and were victimized by their enemies. Their enemies felt no guilt in their ill treatment of God's people.

In verses 8-10 they are admonished to flee from Babylon for the Lord will bring an alliance of nations from the north to take possession of her. Verses 9-10 describe a scene of destruction and plunder. The destruction and battle described here did not take place with the Persian invasion, and we conclude that the ultimate fulfillment of this either came much later or the description is to be understood as idealistic and symbolic.

Verses 11-12 describe the plunder of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. These verses connect with verse 10 by showing that the fate of Jerusalem is to become Babylon's fate. The Babylonian army plundered Jerusalem with arrogance and delight to the point that their mothers would be ashamed of their behavior. They played with the lives of the Hebrews like frolicking heifers or neighing stallions would play in the field. Because of this Babylon will not be inhabited but will be desolate.

Verses 13-16 have a series of commands for the warriors who will fight against Babylon. They are to take up their bows and shoot their arrows, shout against the city on every side, tear down her walls and towers, and take vengeance on her. Much of the language of these verses appears in other oracles of Jeremiah. Babylon had been merciless in its treatment of others, particularly Judah, so the prophet calls for Babylon's own sowers and reapers to be cut off.

#### **Israel's anticipated return. 50:17-20**

In these verses the prophet turns again to Israel. She has been as scattered as sheep being chased by a lion. The king of Assyria first crushed Israel's bones and then the king of Babylon did the same. Therefore those aggressors will be punished, but Israel will return to its own pastures and its cattle will again graze in Bashan. This was a well known cattle grazing area in Israel. Carmel, the hills of Ephraim, and Gilead were all known for their agricultural production.

Verse 20 says that in both Israel and Judah there will be a great spiritual renewal. Though some may search for Israel's and Judah's sins none would be found because God has forgiven his remnant. This language is obviously ideal and symbolic, speaking of God's desire for his restored nation. In Isaiah 11:6-9 the same sentiments are expressed when he says that the lion and lamb would lie down together, the ox and the bear will feed together, the wolf will live with the lamb, and a little child will lead them. Although Isaiah's subject is different both of these passages show the extent to which symbolic and ideal language is used to describe the tranquility in God's purposes.

#### **Judgments against Babylon. 50:21-40**

In verse 21 the command goes out to attack two areas; one is identified as Merathaim and the other as Pekod. Merathaim was in the southern part of Babylonia where the Tigris and Euphrates rivers come close together as they empty into the Persian Gulf. This is thought to have been a play on words since the word Merathaim can also refer to a double rebellion. Pekod was a Babylonian name for a tribe living on the eastern bank of the Tigris River near the Persian Gulf. They

were primarily agricultural people. This is also a play on words since the word Pekod can mean “punishment.”

Verses 22-26 describe the destruction of the great city as the “noise of great destruction,” “broken and shattered,” and “desolate among the nations.” The Lord set a trap for Babylon and she was caught before she knew it. This seems to say that Babylon was completely unaware that such destruction awaited her. The Lord has opened his arsenal and brought out the weapons of his wrath. Therefore he calls certain pagan nations his servants and uses one pagan nation to punish other pagan nations or to punish his own people.

In verse 25 it is important to notice the expression “the Sovereign Lord.” It occurs almost eighty times in the book emphasizing the fact that the Lord is the God of history and of the universe. History is going to culminate in the will of the Lord being done. This doesn’t mean these are predestined events but rather that the Lord will ultimately use all things which occur through the freewill of mankind along with the workings of the Lord to bring about his designed purposes. The destruction of Babylon is like opening granaries and the wheat is piled up.

Verses 27-32 continue to describe the call for armed men to kill the young bulls of Babylon, possibly referring to her mighty men. The day for their slaughter has come. Archers are summoned to come fight against Babylon. Archers formed a fundamental part of all ancient armies. Reliefs discovered in Assyria show the archers at work in important battles. Walled cities were breeched by battering rams with archers’ protection. The refugees and fugitives will declare this news in Zion, no doubt referring to the returnees from the Exile. In verse 20 the Lord is called “the Holy One of Israel.” This expression is found only here and in 51:5 in book of Jeremiah but it occurs frequently in Isaiah.

There is a note of revenge in verses 29-30: “Repay her for her deeds; do to her as she has done,” and “here young men will fall in the streets.” The day of their punishment has come; the arrogant will fall and no one will be there to help them up; fire will consume all who are around the towns.

Verses 33-34 give a short break from the description of Babylon’s fate to describe the abuse of Judah and Israel. They have been held and oppressed, yet their Redeemer is strong and will vigorously defend his own. It may be that the Egyptian bondage is also in the mind of Jeremiah as he compares the hopelessness of that experience with the hopelessness of the exile. Yet, in both of these the Redeemer brings rest to his people in Canaan and rest for those who return from exile. Rest will come to them, but unrest will come to Babylon.

In verses 35-37 he uses the symbol of a sword to describe the coming peril of the Babylonians. That sword will be against her officials, her wise men, and her people. It will be against her false prophets who have become fools, and against her warriors, and her horses and chariots and against all of the foreigners in her ranks. It will be against all the treasures she has accumulated through plundering other nations. Verses 38-40 add that the waters of Babylon will dry up and desert creatures will live there. Thompson has a colorful comment in speaking of desert dwelling animals: “These are of a less reputable character such as jackals, rodents, or hooting owls. No self-respecting creature would live there, much less human beings.” (Thompson, 1980 p.

744.) As God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns, so will be the destruction of Babylon. No one will live there. In Is. 13:19-22 there is similar language concerning Babylon.

### **The agony of Babylon's destruction. 50:41-46**

The language of 50:41-43 is almost identical to that in 6:22-26 except in chapter 6 the language is applied to Nebuchadnezzar's attack on Jerusalem but in chapter 50 it is applied to Babylon's fall. See the comments on 6:22-26. The object of the oracle changes, but the destruction is the same. Perhaps this is because, as stated earlier, Babylon will receive the treatment she has given to others as in 50:29. A great nation and many kings are coming from the north. Both Assyrian and Babylon made regular use of vassal kings. In order to control a vast empire they allowed these puppet kings to rule over certain home areas. They had limited power, but they also had armies which responded to the needs of the Empire. Nabopolassar was king of Babylon but he opposed the Assyrians, driving them out of the southern part of Mesopotamia. In 612 B.C. his army, allied with armies of the Scythians and Medes, destroyed Nineveh bringing an end to the Assyrian Empire. When Jeremiah speaks of many kings he is speaking of these types of vassal kings. The great nation of which he speaks would probably have been Persia in its alliance with some of these vassal kings.

Verses 44-46 are almost identical to the oracle against Edom in 49:19-21 except the object is changed to Babylon rather than Edom. See comments on 49:19-21.

### **More judgments against Babylon. 51:1-14**

The Lord's judgment against Babylon continues with a short statement about the restoration of the people of God to their own land. Verses 1-4 give the Lord's statement that he will stir up the spirit of a destroyer against Babylon. He mentions the people of Leb Kamal in verse 1. Some commentators believe this is an Atbash. That is a literary device in which the letters of the Hebrew alphabet are reversed (the first letter becomes the last letter, etc.) and a secret word is formed. However we must ask, "Why would a secretive name have been used here?" Linguists say that the resulting word would make no sense, so this is generally rejected. Scholars do not know who the people of Leb Kamal might have been.

Verse 2 speaks of winnowing Babylon and her land. The thought is that Babylon will be thrown to the winds just as the wind carries away the chaff when the wheat is winnowed. There is no need for the archer to prepare his bow or put on his armor. The entire army will be destroyed. They will fall down in the streets of Babylon.

Verse 5 is a brief interlude stating that the Lord will stand by Judah and Israel. The expression "Holy One of Israel" is again used in this verse. Its only other occurrence is in 50:29. The land is still referred to as being "full of guilt." There is a question in the minds of some commentators concerning to whom the word "their" refers. Is it the land of Israel or the land of the Chaldeans? Some believe there may be a contrast here. That is, "Israel will not be forsaken, and they will be returned to their land but the land of the Chaldeans is full of guilt." This is not generally considered the accurate interpretation.

Verses 6-9 warn the people to flee from Babylon, so that the innocent will not be destroyed with the guilty. Once again the idea of the Lord's vengeance becomes evident. Sin will not be tolerated beyond the limits of God's patience. In the past the Lord had used Babylon as his servant to punish other nations, particularly Judah, but the time has now come for Babylon to suffer for its own sins. The cup is depicted as a "gold cup" probably referring to the fact that Babylon was a city of great wealth and international fame. Symbolically the Lord says Babylon made the nations drunk with her wine. The sarcastic challenge is to "get balm for her pain, perhaps she can be healed. We would have healed Babylon but she cannot be healed," (vss. 8-9). The question naturally arises, "Who are the 'we' being spoken of?" It is not clear. The subject appears to have been Judah, but there is never any indication that Judah had a desire to heal Babylon. The people of Judah considered the Chaldeans as the source of all of their own pain and suffering, and the destruction of Babylon was from the Lord. Perhaps this is a sort of rhetorical statement which is not designed to obtain an answer, but to make an emphatic statement that there is no possibility for healing. Verse 10 says that the news of Babylon's fall is so exciting that it should be told in Zion and all of God's people will know what has been done.

Verse 11 returns to the general topic of Babylon's demise. There is a call to arms among the Medes who will be one of the kingdoms helping to destroy their foes, the Babylonians. Generally speaking the Medes were not powerful and it doubtful that they alone are being referred to here. The reference may be to a whole group of smaller nations under the leadership of the Medes who were going to be included as God's instruments for the destruction of Babylon. We need to remember that this is poetry, and poetic license is always a part of that genre of literature. The Lord's temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Babylonians and their punishment for this deed would surely come.

Derogatory statements about Babylon continue in verses 12-14. In verse 12 the NIV uses the word "banner" but most English translations have "standard." Keown, *et al.* say that the word "standard" is to be preferred because it reinforces the idea expressed in the next statement of setting up of a guard at the walls. (Keown, *et al.*, 1995, 1 on CD.) All necessary preparation is to be made for an ambush. The writer speaks again with sarcasm by saying "You who are rich in treasures, your end has come, the time for you to be cut off." The number of men to come into the city will be like a swarm of locusts and they will shout in triumph.

### **A hymn of praise to the Lord. 51:15-19**

This entire block is a duplicate of 10:12-16. See comments on that passage. There are many examples of such doublets in Jeremiah. We must remember that we are reading this as a book, but there was probably a span of time which lapsed between the writing of these oracles and various other parts of the book.

### **The war-club of God. 51:20-26**

Verses 20-23 are addressed to an unnamed power referred to as the Lord's war-club. "You are my weapon for battle" is the expression. The KJV and ASV translate this as "battle axe," the NASV, NRSV, and the NIV translate it as "war club" and the RSV uses the word "hammer." Who is the "war-club" (hammer)? Scholars are divided about the identification of this power. A

few believe it is Israel. Some say it refers to the prophet Jeremiah himself since he is bringing all of the oracles against Babylon. The majority appear to believe it is Babylon. In the time of Jeremiah Babylon was the only nation with the kind of strength described here but she was soon to be brought to judgment herself. Babylon had been spoken of as God's servant as he punished various nations. In 50:23 Babylon is referred to as a hammer although a different word is used in the original language. Ten activities of the "hammer" nation are expressed in vss. 21-23. They are:

1. I shatter the nations, vs. 20.
2. I destroy kingdoms, vs. 20.
3. I shatter horse and rider, vs. 21.
4. I shatter chariot and driver, vs. 21.
5. I shatter man and woman, vs. 22.
6. I shatter old man and youth, vs. 22.
7. I shatter young man and maiden, vs. 22.
8. I shatter shepherd and flock, vs. 23.
9. I shatter farmer and oxen, vs. 23.
10. I shatter governors and officials, vs. 23.

The present tense is used throughout verses 20-23, perhaps indicating that the Lord continues to use Babylon in whatever way he chooses.

In verse 24 there is a reversal. This is a brief prose statement that the time of the punishment of Babylon is coming and all who live in Babylon will suffer because of what they did to Zion. In verses 24-26 the Lord continues by stating that he is against the one whom he calls the "destroying mountain" and the one who destroys the whole earth. Various poetic symbols are used to describe the Lord's determination to punish Babylon. We do not know the reason Babylon is described as a mountain except the possibility that she towered above all other nations during her relatively brief period of domination. He also says, "I will stretch out my hand against you, roll you off the cliffs, and make you a burned out mountain." Commentators call attention to the fact that the city of Babylon was situated on a high plain, not in the mountains, and the word for "cliffs" usually refers to "lofty crags of mountains." Most commentators believe that the prophet is using "mountain" and "cliff" symbolically of an Empire which had moved to lofty heights and appeared to be as secure as the mountains but will be run off of the cliff, *i.e.* be completely destroyed. Once again he describes the once proud city as desolate. Nothing will be built there – "no rock will be taken from you for a cornerstone, nor a stone for a foundation," vs. 26.

### **The nations are allied against Babylon. 51:27-33**

This is a reiteration of much of what the prophet has already said in reference to the fall of Babylon. There is however, an important difference. In this oracle many other nations are involved in the demise of the great city. As a call to war the prophets says, "Set up your banners (standards)." This word means more than just a sign or announcement but it is a signal for mustering troops preparing for battle. He continues his call by telling them to sound the trumpet among the nations and prepare for battle. Bring the kingdoms together. He lists the kingdoms of Ararat, Minni, and Ashkenaz, each of which is mentioned in various Assyrian inscriptions. Each of the-

se was known in that day and though small, when brought together they had strength. They were located in the vicinity of Lake Van, about 150 miles (241 km.) north of Nineveh (modern day Mosul). This places them in the present day area of Armenia which is bounded on the west by Turkey, on the south by Iran, on the east by Azerbaijan, and on the north by Georgia.

In verse 28 the prophet adds the Medes to the group along with all of the nations they ruled. Notice that he uses the plural, “*kings* of the Medes” in verse 28. The Medes were located northeast of Babylon. Once again he uses swarms of locusts to symbolize the number of horsemen who will come against the Babylonians. The array of nations and military might was so great that the earth trembled. Once again the desolation of Babylon is stated.

Babylon was conquered by the Persians under Cyrus but history shows that the Medes were closely allied with them as is also seen in Dan. 5-6. The Persians entered Babylon without a fight. The complete collapse of the fighting forces of the Chaldeans is seen not just in their military defeat but also in the soldiers’ morale. Verse 30 states, “Babylon’s warriors have stopped fighting; they remain in their strongholds. Their strength is exhausted; they have become like women.” Comparing soldiers to women was a common expression among many ancient people because they considered women weak compared to the strength of a soldier in hand-to-hand battle. The city is set afire, and messages are taken to the king of Babylon. In ancient warfare it was a regular practice for messengers to take messages to and from the king concerning the progress of the battles.

Babylon was well fortified. It had two massive walls, the ruins of which are still evident. The inner wall was 21 feet (6.4 m.) thick and the outer wall was 12 feet (3.7 m.) thick. In addition, there were various fortresses along the walls. The Euphrates River itself offered protection. Today the ruins of Babylon show a number of these features. The prophet describes this as a threshing floor at the time the grain is trampled. So, Babylon’s end is soon to come.

### **Judah’s complaint and the Lord’s reply. 51:34-40**

In this section we have Judah’s expression of the hardships brought on by Nebuchadnezzar’s invasion of their homeland and their exile. They call on the Lord to bring the same treatment against Babylon as Babylon had brought against them. The Lord listens and he will respond to their calls with punishment of the Babylonians.

In verses 34-35 Nebuchadnezzar is described as a serpent (dragon, monster) which has swallowed Judah and enjoyed it as if Judah was a delicate gourmet meal for him. After he enjoyed the taste of conquest and victory he vomited them up like a glutton. A trail of blood was left behind as Judah suffered from the acts of their conquerors. They ask the Lord to visit on the king of Babylon the same hardships and pain as Nebuchadnezzar had brought on Judah.

Verse 36-40 gives the Lord’s response. In addition, he says that Bel, their god, will be punished and spew out what he has devoured. Obviously this is a symbolic statement designed to show the extent of the Lord’s reprisal against the Babylonians.

Some of the terms used in these verses are legal terms used in a court of law when a person is

pleading a case against another individual. Perhaps all of this description is intended to be symbolic rather than literal in order to show God's displeasure. In any case it describes the extent of God's judgment against the city and country of Babylon.

Verses 38-39 describe Babylon and its victorious conquests. She is like lions and lion cubs roaring over their latest kill. But the Lord will change the character of the celebration. It will be as if they had come to a great festive celebration banquet where they drank their wine to the fullest but then they fell into a drunken stupor never to awaken. They were slaughtered like lambs, rams, and goats. Their appetites for conquest were satisfied but this symbolized the satisfaction of the vengeance of the Lord against this once great city.

### **The fate of Babylon further described. 51:41-48**

We might see this as a continuation of the previous section, but commentators generally treat it separately. In verse 41 the name Sheshak is used. In the Hebrew language this word is an Atbash for Babylon. Various commentators speculate about why the Atbash was used here. Some say that there might have been considerable political danger of using the name "Babylon" rather than the Atbash Sheshak since it is speaking of the ultimate fall of Babylon. However, Babylon is consistently identified elsewhere in Jeremiah. Others believe it might have been an alternate name for Babylon since the Babylonians also used the Atbash at various times. Babylon will become a horror among the nations.

In verses 42-43 the prophet speaks of the sea rising over Babylon and her towns being covered with roaring waves. This could not be referring to the Euphrates River, and the Persian Gulf was too far away to be considered. The language is symbolic and is used to describe the complete overwhelming of Babylon and its surrounding towns. The writer may be taunting the complete helplessness of Babylon's religion and her chief god Marduk. If this is so, Jeremiah's statement would be referring to the ancient Babylonia Creation Myth. In that Myth the chaotic waters of a primeval ocean were under the control of the goddess Tiamat, an adversary of the god Marduk. Marduk fought against Tiamat and destroyed her. If this is in the mind of the writer then it is symbolic of the Lord's complete sovereignty over all forces and pagan gods. The god Marduk is seen as no god at all since Babylon will be destroyed symbolized by the flood waters overwhelming the city.

The cuneiform tablets containing Babylonian Creation Myth were discovered in the library of the Assyrian king, Ashurbanipal (669-627? B.C.) during excavations of his palace by Austen Layard, Hormuz Rassam, and George Smith between 1848 until 1876. Other copies of the myth have also been discovered in other places. (Pfeiffer, 1966, p. 224.) Once again our prophet says that they land of Babylon will be uninhabited.

Verse 44 refers to the god Bel who was the same as Marduk the "lord" of the gods of Babylon. See comments on 50:2. In verse 34 Nebuchadnezzar is spoken of as a monster gulping down the city and people of Jerusalem. Babylon will spew out what he has swallowed, seeming to indicate that all that Nebuchadnezzar had devoured would be surrendered. Nations which formerly flowed into the great city will no longer do so and the wall of Babylon will fall. See comments on 51:33 concerning the fortification of the walls.



With all of this in mind, verse 45 exhorts and warns the exiles: “Come out of her my people! Run for your lives! Run from the fierce anger of the Lord. Do not lose heart or be afraid.” By doing this they will bring to fulfillment God’s promise of their restoration, 50:8 and 51:6. The problem was that Judah may lose heart and become fearful. Rumors of violence and war abounded and such things could become a discouragement to the exiles. The Empire was known to have had many small uprisings and vassal kings frequently rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar. Judah itself was an example of this. Three years after Jehoiakim became a vassal of Nebuchadnezzar he rebelled causing the Babylonians and some of their allies to invade Judah again, II Kgs. 24:1-3. Later Zedekiah rebelled resulting in the final invasion of Jerusalem and Judah, II Kgs. 25:1-3. Various other puppet kings and their armies rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar. The Babylonian Empire was not a peaceful kingdom and many of these rebellions were met with violent reprisals. Judah could have felt that its fears were well founded. Upon the death of Nebuchadnezzar there was a succession of kings, assassination, and usurpations of power. All of this could have made the exiles feel that theirs was a hopeless situation. Nothing is specified so we do not know what uprisings the prophet might have had in mind.

### **Encouragement for the exiles to persevere. 51:49-53**

This section has a combination of exhortations to the exiles and the Lord’s purpose in destroying Babylon. The coming punishment of Babylon is part of the reason for hope for the exiles. Babylon must fall – it must pay the price – because of all the Israelites it has slain. This price is also extracted because of the slain of all the earth who have fallen because of Babylon. She must pay for her ruthlessness. The exiles are told not to linger but to remember the Lord even though they were in a faraway land. Let this be an encouragement to persevere and think about Jerusalem.

In verses 51-53 the exiles reply that they have been shamed by their captors who had not only invaded, but had desecrated the Lord’s temple. However, the day is coming, says the Lord, when he will punish the idols of Babylon. To punish the gods of a nation was the ultimate insult against that nation. No matter how strong Babylon appears – even if she reaches the sky and fortifies her strongholds – she will fall. These statements of encouragement are given a number of times in chapters 50 and 51. This implies that the captives, having been in Babylon for roughly 70 years, viewed their situation as impossible – doomed to failure – and Jeremiah is striving to bring a note of optimism to them. Some commentators believe that the expression “Even if Babylon reaches the sky” is a reminder of the great ziggurat of Babylon and the tower of Babel in Gen. 11. Isaiah spoke of the arrogance of the Babylonian king in Is. 14:13 where he said, “I will ascend to heaven, I will raise my throne above the stars of God.” Judah is being assured that none of the strength and might of Babylon can escape the punishment of the Lord.

### **Babylon is finally repaid for its evil. 51:54-58**

These verses do not contain any new information but they form a sort of replay of certain things mentioned earlier. Verse 54 describes the faint death cry of the dying Empire. It is the sound of great destruction. She has been noisy, but now her cries are faint. The Lord will silence her and her enemies will overwhelm her as if waves of water had engulfed her. Here warriors will be captured and their bows broken. Once again the prophet says they will sleep forever as in 51:38-39. In verse 58 he describes the defeat of Babylon by speaking of her massive walls being lev-

eled and her high gates set on fire. The labor of the nation is now vain and her work is described as fuel for the fire of destruction. This is a fitting end of the oracle against Babylon.

### **A symbolic action against Babylon. 51:59-64**

The book of Jeremiah has a number of action symbols such as Jeremiah's visit to the potter house. Verses 59-64 form a sort reflection on these oracles which have so severely condemned to destruction one of the most beautiful and unique cities in the history of the world. Jeremiah writes on a scroll an account of all that will befall Babylon at the time of her collapse. Seraiah takes the scroll to Babylon. He had been instructed by Jeremiah to read it aloud. Having done this he is to repeat Jeremiah's statement concerning the destruction of the city. Following the reading of the scroll he is to take it to the Euphrates River, tie a stone to it and throw it into the river. Then he is to say, "So will Babylon sink to rise no more because of the disaster I will bring upon her. And her people will fall." In his final symbolic act, Jeremiah brings to a close his last oracle against the Babylonians.

## **Chapter XVI**

### **Historical Appendix: The Fall of Jerusalem**

#### **52:1-34**

#### **Introduction**

The material in this chapter forms an appendix to the book of Jeremiah. The final statement in chapter 51 tells us that the words of Jeremiah have ended. We do not know the origin of chapter 52 or exactly why it was added since almost all of this information is found in II Kgs. 25:1-30, II Chron. 36:11-21, and Jer. 39:1-14. In studying Jer. 52 it is important to read the accounts of the fall of Jerusalem in II Kings and II Chronicles. Also, see notes in Chapter XII “The Siege and Fall of Jerusalem.”

Chapter 52 divides itself into four sections. First there is the fall of Jerusalem and the capture of Zedekiah (vss. 1-11), second is the destruction of the temple and all buildings in Jerusalem (vss. 12-23), third we have the number who were deported to Babylon (vss. 24-30), and fourth is the release of Jehoiachin from prison (31-34).

The information in verses 1-3 is almost identical with that in II Kgs. 24:25—25:1. The mother of Zedekiah is said to be Hamutal, daughter of Jeremiah. This would not be the prophet Jeremiah because he was from Anathoth while Hamutal was from Libnah. Its location is not known, but there is reference to a city of that name in Num. 33:21. In Josh 10:29-31 a city by that name was conquered by Joshua during his conquest of the southern part of Palestine, the Shephelah.

#### **The fall of Jerusalem. 52:1-11**

Verses 3-5 tell us that Zedekiah rebelled against Babylon. This kind of action by a vassal king was common in the Babylonian Empire and Nebuchadnezzar had a difficult time keeping all parts of the empire under his control. In Zedekiah’s ninth year, the tenth month, and the tenth day Nebuchadnezzar’s army marched against Jerusalem. According to chronological information in the Babylonian Chronicle this places the time of the invasion at approximately the beginning of January 588 B.C. The army encamped outside the city and built their war machines as they prepared the siege of Jerusalem. A siege might involve battering rams, mobile towers, and other large equipment. From a mobile tower an enemy could hurl missiles or burning tar and archers could attack enemies on the wall. The siege of Jerusalem began in the tenth month of Zedekiah’s ninth year, and the wall was finally breached in the fourth month of his eleventh year.

From Assyrian reliefs we have excellent pictures of war equipment during this general period. During the reign of Hezekiah (715-687 B.C.) the Assyrians attacked the cities and towns in the southern part of Palestine and also threatened Jerusalem itself. The victories in the south were celebrated by the Assyrians and large reliefs. These were figures which were carved on large stone slabs. Many Assyrian reliefs are now in the British Museum and have given archaeologists a very good understanding of the appearance and construction of ancient battering rams and other war “machines.”

Verses 6-7 tell us that the food supply gave out in the ninth day of the fourth month. The wall was breached at almost the same time. The army of Judah fled, heading for the Arabah. The text says they fled through the gates between the walls. The meaning of “the gates between the two walls” is not known. The Arabah is a broad term which refers to a natural rift in the earth’s surface. It is frequently applied to the Jordan Valley rift but it may also include the rift of the Dead Sea. The term is not specific. Zedekiah was not mentioned in verse 7 when the army fled, but he is present at the time that the Babylonians overtook them in the plains of Jericho so it is assumed that the army was really helping the king escape. Jericho is located very near to the place where the Jordan River empties into the Dead Sea. The soldiers separated from him and were scattered. This was night, and it may be that they simply got separated in the darkness.

Verses 8-10 tell us that Zedekiah was captured by the Babylonians who took him to Riblah where Nebuchadnezzar had set up his own headquarters. Riblah was an ancient Syrian town about 75 miles (121 km.) north of Damascus and was at the meeting point of several military routes between Egypt and Mesopotamia. See comments on 39:1-10. Nebuchadnezzar pronounced sentence on Zedekiah. His sons were brought before the Babylonian king and were slaughtered before their father’s eyes. The officials of Judah were also killed and Zedekiah’s eyes were put out and he was taken to Babylon as a prisoner. He apparently died in prison, but nothing more is said about him.

### **The burning of the city of Jerusalem. 52:12-23**

Verse 12 identified Nebuzaradan as the commander of Nebuchadnezzar’s imperial guard. He arrived in Jerusalem on the tenth day of the fifth month in the nineteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar. This is the year 587 B.C. The breach had been made in the walls in the fourth month (our July) and Nebuzaradan arrived the next month. His task was to burn the city down beginning with the temple and the royal palace. Verses 12-14 tell us that the whole Babylonian army was involved in the destruction of the city. Verse 15 seems to be out of order since verses 24-30 tell us the particulars of the number of people carried away at this time. However, at this point the writer tells us that Nebuzaradan took into captivity some of the poorest people who had remained in the city along with various craftsmen and others who had gone over to the king of Babylon. Others among the poor were left in the land to work the vineyards and the fields. We don’t know the criteria which might have been used to determine who would stay in the city and who would be taken into exile. Some commentators suggest that it might have been based on the needs of the Babylonians to carry out needed jobs in their own country. It should also be remembered that II Kgs. 24:10-17 tell of many others who were taken captive.

Verses 17-23 tell us of the valuables in Jerusalem which were carried away along with the precious metals. See also II Kg. 25:13-17. They looted the temple and palace of their valuables as they had done in a prior invasion, II Kgs. 24:13-17. The exact identification of some of these treasures is not understood by scholars. The bronze pillars and bronze seas were taken. These are mentioned at the time the temple was built. Many of the items mentioned in the looting of the temple are described more fully in I Kgs. 7:15-50. Some of these items were massive. The bronze sea was 15 feet (4.57 m.) in diameter and 7 ½ feet (2.28 m.) tall. The pillars were 27 feet (8.23 m.) high. Each of these items was valuable. In addition, there were many gold and silver items carried away, II Kgs. 24:13. Although identical objects have not been discovered by ar-

chaeologists, various similar discoveries such as incense bowls, shovels, pots, and snuffers have helped scholars understand the significance and value of the furnishings of the temple.

### **The number deported to Babylon. 52:24-30**

Verses 24-26 describe some of the people of high rank who were deported along with the total numbers of others. Seraiah was the chief priest and was the grandson of Hilkiah the chief priest during the reign of Josiah. Zephaniah the next highest priest was probably the same as Zephaniah the son of Maaseiah mentioned in Jer. 21:1. Three doorkeepers are mentioned next. The RSV and NRSV translate this as “guardians (or keepers) of the threshold.” These are probably priests of a lower rank who took care of the temple, but their function is not known for sure.

Verse 27 points out the brutality of the Babylonians and Nebuchadnezzar who executed a group of Jerusalem officials. The barbaric violence of the Babylonian officials shows the foundation for the Lord’s wrath against that empire.

Verses 28-30 give the number of people taken into captivity. The total is only 4,600 which appears to be very small. Thousands of deportees are reported in II Kgs. 24:14-16. There is really no objective explanation for this. Some believe these are only the males, others believe there was a revisionist editor who inflated the numbers in II Kgs. 24.

### **The release of Jehoiachin. 52:31-34**

Nebuchadnezzar took Jehoiachin to Babylon as a prisoner, II Kgs. 24:15. His release is described in II Kgs. 25:27-30 and in Jer. 52:32-34. Nebuchadnezzar died in 562 B.C. and he was succeeded by his son whose Acadian name was Amel-Marduk but he is better known as by his Hebrew name, Evil-Merodach. He was assassinated by Neriglissar his brother-in-law after ruling for only a short time, 561-560 B.C. During his brief regency however he freed Jehoiachin and gave him a place of honor. Such acts of kindness were frequently practiced by new monarchs when they first took the throne. When a new king came to power vassal kings would generally reaffirm their allegiance, even though this was probably a meaningless ritual. Jehoiachin may have been regarded by some of the exiled Jews as the legitimate king of Judah. He was given a special place among the kings of other nations who were also in exile in Babylon. Jehoiachin enjoyed this place of prominence for the remainder of his life.

## **Appendix A**

### **Excavations at Ugarit and The Worship of Baal**

The discovery of the Ugaritic texts sheds a great deal of light on the ancient religious practices of the Canaanites and Phoenicians, particularly regarding Baal worship. Information gained from these excavations has contributed immeasurably to our understanding of the nature and attractions of Baal worship as it infiltrated Israel and Judah particularly during the divided kingdom period. Ugarit was a very important commercial city dating back to about 1400 B.C. It was located a few miles inland from the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea and it is about 75 miles (121 km.) due east of the eastern peninsula of the island of Cyprus. Ugarit is now part of the country of Syria.

In 1928 a peasant plowman accidentally uncovered an ancient tombstone on his farm at Ugarit, not far from Ras Shamrah. As was customary, this finding was reported to the French Embassy in Beirut, and French archaeologists were informed of the discovery. In 1929 the area was excavated by a team of French archaeologists led by Claude F.A. Schaeffer. The original excavations uncovered a house and its library. The building appears to have housed a scribe's school and hundreds of clay tablets were discovered in the library. These tablets provided archaeologists with excellent information concerning the worship of the Canaanite and Phoenician gods and goddesses, including the bizarre sexual practices of the pagan fertility cults including Baal and Dagon. The building turned out to be the house of the chief priest.

The oldest of these tablets date back to about 1400 B.C. This is about one hundred fifty years before Israel's exodus from Egypt. A number of religious articles such as small figurines of Baal were also discovered. Additional excavations were conducted in 1948 when the royal palace was discovered, yielding important historical texts. Excavations continued, the latest having been conducted by French archaeologists in the year 2000. In 1979 the Syrian government was converting a portion of the area into an air field, and the future of excavations is in doubt. For further information see A.S. Kapelrud, 1962, pp. 724-732 and Wright, 1956, pp. 24-26. Also there are numbers of excellent articles on the Internet but it is important that the sources of these articles have verifiable academic credentials.

#### **The Canaanite gods and goddesses**

The Canaanite gods and goddesses formed a family of deities, the head of which was El. Not very much is said about him, because he seems to have had little "contact" with humans. El's wife was Asherah who was the mother-goddess and the goddess of fertility, but she did not occupy this position exclusively. During the Divided Kingdom period, Jezebel had 400 prophets of Baal and 450 prophets of Asherah at Mt. Carmel (I Kings 18:19). The symbol of the presence of Asherah was a pole or a sacred tree. Sometime the KJV speaks of this as a "grove."

Baal was the prominent offspring of El and Asherah, either as a son or a grandson. Archaeological records are not completely clear on this. The name "Baal" meant "lord," and could apply to a number of different gods in the Canaanite pantheon, although it is specifically applied to the off-

spring of El and Asherah. Baal was the god who supposedly controlled the rain, storms, lightning, vegetation, and human reproduction.

The name of Baal was frequently attached to personal names, and also to the names of cities. Anath was the sister and wife of Baal, and she was the goddess of both war and love. She was similar to the Mesopotamian goddess Ashtoreth (I Sam. 31:10 and other references). Mot was the god of death, and the greatest enemy of Baal. Each fall when the rains ceased, the Canaanites attributed this to the idea that Mot, the god of death, had defeated and killed Baal, the god of rain and storms. This caused droughts and the death of vegetation. (Notice the drought in Israel, at the time of Ahab and Elijah and the contest on Mt. Carmel.) The return of later rains was believed to have taken place because Baal's warrior wife (Anath) hunted down and defeated Mot (death), and brought Baal back to life. Baal and Anath once again mate, and this brings the spring rains and the return of fertility to humans, animals, and vegetation. Thus, the worshippers of Baal believed that turning against Baal was a threat to the survival of their civilization.

It is important to see how the idea of animal and plant fertility, sex, and human reproduction played an important role in Canaanite culture and religion. Since the gods and goddesses of the Canaanites supposedly controlled human and animal reproduction, they were considered necessary for the survival of humankind as well as food production. This also meant that there were no standards of sexual morality among the worshippers of Baal. The Israelites were easily drawn into these permissive pagan sexual practices.

Among the Sidonians these gods and goddesses were important. Jezebel, the Sidonian wife of Ahab, was an ardent worshipper of Baal. In addition, child sacrifice, sacred prostitution, and snake worship were also parts of their cult. Many fertility rites were associated with the worship of Baal, Asherah, and Ashtoreth, and these became stumbling blocks to the Israelites while they were in Canaan. Similar gods and goddesses, with different names, were worshipped at various times from Babylon to Rome. With these things in mind, it is easy to see why God warned Israel not to make any treaties or agreements with the nations of Canaan, and not to intermarry with them. Violation of these warnings finally resulted in Israel's downfall.

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